

Reclaiming Native Truth



A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Lessons Learned from Standing Rock
July 2018



Photography Credit: Taliesin Gilkes Bower

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JULY
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“We interrupted the narrative of who and what Indian people are in the 21st century.”

—Judith LeBlanc, (Caddo Nation), Executive Director, Native Organizers Alliance

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**“What Standing
Rock did for all of
America was that
it brought past
injustices to the
present.”**

—Jodi Gillette

*(Standing Rock Sioux Tribe), former Special Assistant to the President for Native
American Affairs for the White House Domestic Policy Council*



LESSONS LEARNED FROM STANDING ROCK

The movement at Standing Rock significantly undermined the systemic erasure of Native peoples from the dominant American narrative. At a time when most Americans continued to believe that Native Americans and Nations no longer exist in the United States, Americans were presented with a movement that forced a new conversation around values, identity, and our collective connection to the Earth around us and the lands we live on.

“Standing Rock’s fight against DAPL has provided enormous visibility to all things Native.”

—Jodi Gillette (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*)

For several months from August 2016 until February 2017—and during a Presidential election—millions of Americans and a global audience witnessed a powerful story unfold, told through citizen journalists, social media, alternative media, and then ultimately mainstream media. Tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of Tribal Nations traveled to Cannonball, North Dakota, to stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its opposition to a pipeline that threatened to destroy the Tribe’s drinking water, historic treaty lands, and sacred sites.

Suddenly, Native Americans were no longer simply characters from the past that occasionally pop out of oblivion and into a Western movie or a museum. Instead, Americans watched as contemporary Native Americans populated the daily news diet with articulate, powerful narratives concerning the sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe—and

all Tribal Nations—as well the collective threat that climate change and losing our drinking water poses to us all.

“In the last twenty or thirty years, there hasn’t been anything that pierced the broader public consciousness and made people [more] aware of what’s going on in Indian Country than this.”

—Jan Hasselman, *EarthJustice*

The movement at Standing Rock was successful for many reasons, but four in particular. First, the messaging of the movement was not opportunistic, but instead was organic, authentic, and created from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s traditional teachings and cultural values. Second, the movement itself grew from the grassroots and was guided by the leadership of a Tribal Nation. Third, the movement brought together the largest unification of Tribal Nations in recent history. This coming together and solidarity of hundreds of Tribal Nations constituted a powerful exercise of the sovereignty that hundreds of years of American policies and laws had sought, but failed, to eradicate. Fourth, the movement leveraged the power of social and alternative media, combined with the advocacy of celebrities, to force coverage by mainstream media.



TIMELINE

- + **November 2015:** Obama State Department denies the Keystone XL pipeline the authority to cross the international border between United States and Canada.
- + **December 8, 2015:** The Army Corps issues a draft Environmental Assessment, laying the groundwork to grant Dakota Access LLC the easements the company needs to cross the Missouri River.
- + **January 8 and March 24, 2016:** The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe provides extensive comments on the failure of the Army Corps to engage in consultation regarding sites of historic and cultural significance in the pipeline's proposed path.
- + **April 2, 2016:** Youth from Standing Rock create the Sacred Stone Camp on the Cannonball River at the northern edge of Standing Rock's reservation.
- + **April 24, 2016:** A group of youth from Standing Rock leave Cannonball, North Dakota, to run all the way to Omaha, Nebraska, to deliver a petition to Colonel Henderson, Commander of the Omaha District of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The petition that the youth carried from Cannonball contained 457,000 signatures and demanded that the Army Corps refrain from granting Dakota Access Pipeline the easement the company needs to construct the pipeline across the Missouri River.
- + **May 3, 2016:** The youth arrive in Omaha. Colonel Henderson refuses to meet with them.
- + **July 15, 2016:** Thirty runners set out from the Sacred Stone Camp to run to the White House and demand that President Obama stop the pipeline.
- + **July 25, 2016:** The Army Corps issues the Final Environmental Assessment, making a finding of "no significant impact," essentially granting Dakota Access LLC the easement necessary to cross Lake Oahe/Missouri River.
- + **July 26, 2016:** The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe files a complaint in federal district court, in Washington DC, against the Army Corps alleging that the July 25 Environmental Assessment violates federal law.

"On the run and at camp we stayed in our ways, we prayed and we sang songs. I think the run helped me in a way find myself...before the run I wasn't as interactive with other people and I wasn't like I guess a leader you could say... I found myself from doing the run."

—Tariq Brown Otter (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe), youth leader

- + **August 4, 2016:** The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe files a motion for preliminary injunction, asking the federal court to enjoin the Army Corps from granting the permit, and thus to essentially prohibit Dakota Access from commencing construction on the pipeline across the Missouri River/Lake Oahe.
- + **August 12, 2016:** Dakota Access starts construction; current Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman Dave Archambault II, along with many others, speak out against the construction and are arrested.

“When Dave got arrested it changed everything because it showed a tribal leader being arrested, and I think that’s what fired up so many Tribes, even other oil and gas Tribes.”

—Nick Tilsen (Oglala Lakota Nation), former director of Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation

- + **August 19, 2016:** Governor Dalrymple of North Dakota declares a “state of emergency” and sets up a roadblock thirty miles north of the camp and Standing Rock’s reservation.
- + **August 24, 2016:** Chairman Dave Archambault II’s op-ed appears in the New York Times.
- + **August 24, 2016:** The Federal District Court holds oral argument on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s motion for preliminary injunction.
- + **August 25, 2016:** NBC political commentator Lawrence O’Donnell goes on air, live, in front of millions of Americans and derides the injustices the United States is committing against the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.
- + **September 2, 2016:** Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Tim Mentz files an affidavit in Judge Boasberg’s court (United States District Court, District of

Photography Credit: Taliesin Gilkes Bower



Columbia) identifying 82 stone features, cairns, burials, and stone rings, archeological sites, and 27 burials on land just 1.5 miles north of Standing Rock's reservation, along the corridor path for the pipeline leading up to the Missouri River/Lake Oahe.

- + **September 3, 2016:** Beginning at 6:00a.m., Dakota Access bulldozes the burial grounds identified in Tim Mentz's declaration; Water Protectors show up, and the company's private security force uses attack dogs on them; *Democracy Now!* host Amy Goodman captures it all on film—within 48 hours, the video has 14 million views.
- + **September 9, 2016:** Judge Boasberg denies the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's motion for preliminary injunction.
- + **September 9, 2016:** The The Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of the Interior (DOI), and Army Corps issue a statement that the July 25 Environmental Assessment did not grant Dakota Access the easement they need, legally, to construct across the Missouri River/Lake Oahe, and that further investigation will be necessary to ensure adequate consultation with Tribal Nations has taken place.
- + **October 23, 2016:** Hollywood celebrity Shailene Woodley hosts a rally in Los Angeles to "Stand with Standing Rock."
- + **October 25, 2016:** Reverend Jesse Jackson, who is present at the camp, issues a public statement making a strong parallel between the Civil Rights movement of the 60s and the 70s and the movement at Standing Rock.
- + **October 25, 2016:** Hollywood celebrity Mark Ruffalo arrives at Cannonball to stand with Standing Rock.
- + **October 27, 2016:** One day after Reverend Jesse Jackson leaves Standing Rock, police raid the northern camp and arrest 140 Water Protectors.
- + **November 3, 2016:** 500 religious leaders from 20 different faiths joined in prayer at Standing Rock.
- + **November 8, 2016:** Donald Trump is elected President of the United States.
- + **December 4, 2016:** The Army Corps announces it will undertake a full Environmental Impact Statement, making clear that Dakota Access LLC does not currently have the easement it needs to construct the pipeline across the Missouri River/Lake Oahe. At least 2,000 U.S. military veterans arrive at Standing Rock amid frigid cold to stand in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Water Protectors.
- + **January 18, 2017:** The Army Corps issues a public statement announcing it will receive comments on the full Environmental Impact Statement it is undertaking for the Dakota Access Pipeline.
- + **January 20, 2017:** Donald Trump is inaugurated as President of the United States.
- + **January 24, 2017:** President Trump signs an Executive Order instructing the Army Corps to grant Dakota Access any and all easements necessary to construct the pipeline across Lake Oahe/Missouri River.
- + **February 8, 2017:** The Army Corps terminates the Environmental Impact Statement process and grants Dakota Access LLC the easement it needs to construct the pipeline across the Missouri River and Lake Oahe.
- + **February 22, 2017:** The camp at Standing Rock closes. At some points in time, more than 13,000 people had gathered there to stand with Standing Rock and nearly 400 tribal nations stood in solidarity with the tribe.



The Movement's Messaging Was Grounded in Culture and Traditions

The Standing Rock Movement's messaging was incredibly effective. Hashtags such as #MniWiconi and #StandWithStandingRock and #NoDAPL trended on social media and gained significant traction worldwide. The success of these messages, however, was no accident. Instead, core organizers of the Movement were very intentional in their efforts to create messages that would propel the Movement forward. Messages like "Water is Life" and "Stand-WithStandingRock" were successful because they

1. Originated from authentic cultural teachings and traditions;
2. Were connected to, and identified as continuing to address, the injustices of the past; and
3. Spoke to values that were universal in their application to Natives and non-Natives.

The Messaging Originated from Core Authentic Traditional Teachings and Culture

As core organizers have explained, they drew on their own culture and traditional teachings (teachings they have embraced since time immemorial) to create messaging points that were authentic and organic, but would also resonate with a universal, non-Native audience. The majority of individuals interviewed agreed that "Water is Life" was one of the most powerful messages/narratives coming out of the Movement.

As former Chairman Dave Archambault II explained, "'Mni Wiconi/Water is Life' wasn't merely a catchy phrase created by the Movement. Instead, it was created from a cultural understanding that our water is one of four elements that give life: the earth gives life, the sun gives life, the air gives life, and the water gives life. And I said, in our way, in order for us to live, we have to have all four of those, so we have to protect them."

To be sure, the cultural and traditional messages utilized by the Movement came from prayer and a spiritual practice. As core organizer Nick Tilsen explained, an important "part about the messaging is [that] it was a spiritual relationship with the ancestors. We understood that. We were not on that prairie all by ourselves. Our ancestors were there with us, and they were there to protect us." As Tilsen further reflected, "every single Indigenous movement that has actually worked has been 'nonpolitical' spiritual leaders combined with activists in other types of leadership. And that happened at Standing Rock."

The Messaging Made Historical Connections Between Past and Present Injustices

The Movement was further successful because the Movement's messaging articulated clear connections between historical injustices and brought them front and center into the present.

Instead of focusing on the routine environmental messaging points that most utilize in opposing fossil

fuel expansion, the movement “really embrac[ed] the history,” explained Jan Hasselman of the environmental law firm EarthJustice. Standing Rock’s focus on its own history “was vastly more successful at penetrating people’s consciousness than these really abstract environmental and climate messages which are incredibly important but have just proven to be very hard to get people to care about.”

This was, in part, because the Chairman of Standing Rock at that time, Dave Archambault, stuck to “very simple and compelling soundbites around history and justice. [H]e wasn’t talking about the mechanics

of oil pipelines and he certainly wasn’t talking about climate and ‘leave it in the ground.’ He was talking about history and embedding this story in the arc of the history of the Standing Rock people,” Hasselman explained.

For instance, in the Chairman’s August 24 New York Times op-ed (a publication that marked the moment in time that many highlighted as the “tipping point” when the Movement went from obscurity and exclusion in mainstream media to a national news story consumed by millions), Dave Archambault connected the past to present injustices for Americans, (see quote below).

It’s a familiar story in Indian Country. This is the third time that the Sioux Nation’s lands and resources have been taken without regard for tribal interests. The Sioux peoples signed treaties in 1851 and 1868. The government broke them before the ink was dry.



When the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the Missouri River in 1958, it took our riverfront forests, fruit orchards and most fertile farmland to create Lake Oahe. Now the Corps is taking our clean water and sacred places by approving this river crossing. Whether it’s

gold from the Black Hills or hydropower from the Missouri or oil pipelines that threaten our ancestral inheritance, the tribes have always paid the price for America’s prosperity.¹

—Dave Archambault

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/opinion/taking-a-stand-at-standing-rock.html>

Just one day later, MSNBC's political commentator Lawrence O'Donnell took the historical connections embedded in Chairman Dave Archambault's op-ed and broadcast them on national T.V. His entire

soliloquy won the hearts and minds of millions of Americans, and in pertinent part, he further connected past injustices to the ongoing injustices in the present (see quote below).

Dakota means friend, friendly. The people who gave that name to the Dakotas have sadly never been treated as friends. The people whose language was used to name the Dakotas and Minnesota and Iowa and Oklahoma, Ohio, Connecticut, Massachusetts and other states, the Native American tribes. The people who were here before us long before us have never been treated as friends.

They have been treated as enemies and dealt with more harshly than any other enemy in any of this country's wars. After all of our major wars, we signed peace treaties and lived by those treaties.

Donald Trump and his supporters now fear the country being invaded by foreigners who want to change our way of life, a fear that Native Americans have lived with every day for over 500 years. The original sin of this country is that we invaders shot and murdered our way across the land killing every Native American we could and making treaties with the rest. This country was founded on genocide before the word genocide was invented, before there was a war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

When we finally stopped actively killing Native Americans for the crime of living here before us, we then preceded to violate every treaty we made with the



**Lawrence
O'Donnell,
MSNBC's political
commentator**

After World War II when we made peace with Germany, we then did everything we possibly could to rebuild Germany. No Native American tribe has ever been treated as well as we treated Germans after World War II.

tribes, every single treaty. We piled crime on top of crime on top of crime against the people whose offense against us was simply that they lived where we wanted to live.

We don't feel the guilt of those crimes because we pretended they happened a very long time ago in ancient history and we actively suppressed the memories of those crimes. But there are people alive today whose grandparents were in the business of killing Native Americans. That's how recent these crimes are.

Every once and a while, there is a painful and morally embarrassing reminder as there is this week in North Dakota near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where hundreds of people have gathered and camped out in opposition to an interstate pipeline being built from North Dakota to Illinois. Being led by this country's original environmentalists, Native Americans. For hundreds of years they were our only environmentalists.

The only people who thought that land and rivers should be preserved in their natural state. The only people who thought a mountain or a prairie or a river could be a sacred place.

Yesterday, a Federal judge heard arguments from the tribes against the Federal government's approval of the pipeline and said he will deliver his decision on whether the pipeline can proceed next month. There are now over 93 tribes gathered in protest of that pipeline. That protest will surely continue even if the judge allows construction to proceed.

And so we face the prospect next month of the descendants of the first people to ever set foot on that land, being arrested by the descendants of the invaders who seized that land. Arrested for trespassing. That we still have Native Americans left in this country to be arrested for trespassing on their own land is testament not to the mercy of the genocidal invaders who seized and occupied their land, but to the stunning strength and the 500 years of endurance and the undying dignity of the people who were here long before us, the people who have always known what is truly sacred in this world.



Nick Tilsen witnessed O'Donnell's speech and reflected: "He wasn't just acting. He was astounded, like, 'Whoa, we're doing this to Indian people now in the 21st century? This is crazy.' And he was authentically moved by this and was like, 'How wrong is this on every level?' And honestly, ... watching live – whenever he did his first piece and that monologue that he did, I think that it was one of the best monologues ever done conceptualizing the Indigenous people's issues in a monologue that's done by mainstream journalists, I think almost ever. And I think that it moved the hearts and minds of millions of Americans."

The Messaging was Universal in its Application

Finally, the Movement's messaging was powerfully effective because the core messages were universal in their application.

As Tilsen stated, the "Mni Wiconi/Water is Life" messaging was incredibly effective because "it [worked in] both [an] Indigenous and non-Indigenous context. . . . that people could relate to [I]t became universal because water is everywhere, and everywhere it needs to be protected." And as Tariq Brown Otter, one of the youth who ran thousands of miles to take the petition to President Obama, and member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, noted: "[E]veryone has to drink water to live." "It's real simple," former Standing Rock Chairman Dave Archambault explained. "Water is Life" is "a phrase that anyone can relate to, anyone can be a part of."

Or, as Judith LeBlanc put it, "Water is life - plain, simple, direct." LaDonna Allard (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) reflected that: "We stuck to 'Mni Wiconi. Water is Life.' And I don't think that has even changed. When I was at the UN, every country stood up and said that. And I was sitting there



“It doesn’t matter how much money you have, where you live, where you come from. When the water is gone, the water is gone. And I think people recognize that and in a way it humbled everyone universally to be on the same page, to be on the same level, to participate in the movement with one unified vision.”

—Shailene Woodley

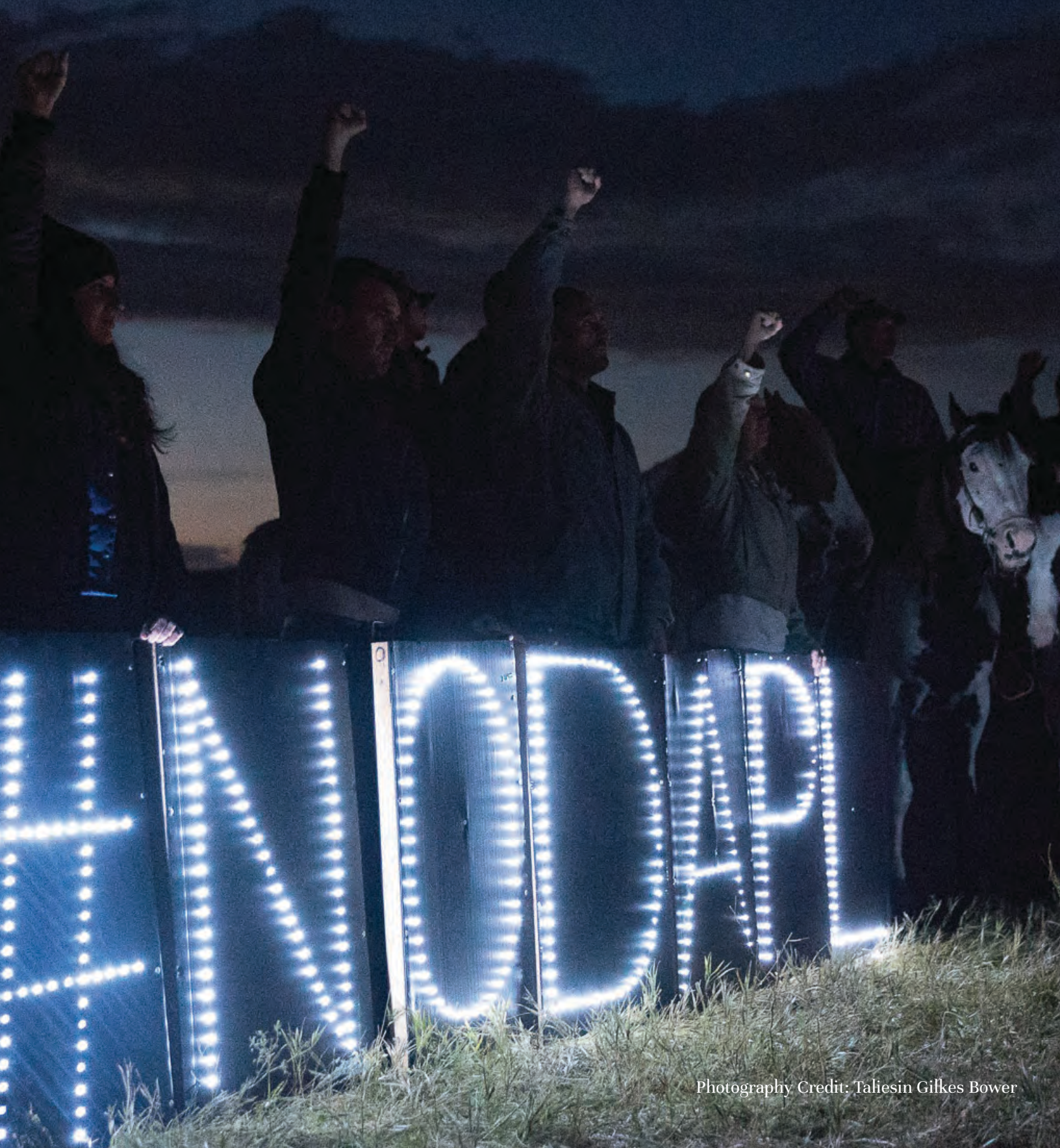
Amy Goodman
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Americans**
[were] defining
themselves.”



thinking ‘Oh my God! China is saying Mni Wiconi!’ It is still the message today. How those words have went to every corner in the world, it’s like it’s branded now.” Indeed, “Mni Wiconi” began to trend on online social media platforms like Twitter, and today “Mni Wiconi” can be found on t-shirts and stickers worn around the world.

Ultimately, the Movement’s core organizers controlled the narrative and refused to let opponents and mainstream media define their Movement. As someone who is quite familiar with the manner in which mainstream media ordinarily defines movements organized by communities of color, Amy Goodman made a point to state that it “was really important [that] Native Americans [were] defining themselves.”

This self-definition was critical, in particular, around the label “protestors.” North Dakota, along with the media supporting the oil company and the State, were working to create a narrative that cast the Natives at Standing Rock as dangerous and violent. The Movement’s core organizers rejected that narrative. As Nick Tilsen explained, “I think the other core messaging was that we’re ‘Protectors Not Protestors’ . . . We decided. ‘Let’s not be protestors.’ We’re not protesting the system, we’re exercising our inherent right to self-determination and responsibility to protect our water and our land, so we’re protectors.” Or, as Judith LeBlanc put it, those who showed up to support Standing Rock “weren’t protestors, they weren’t there to create a violent situation,” so it was important to communicate “that they were there really grounded in prayer and in spirituality in our values.”



“These messages brought people from many miles and brought delegations from hundreds of Tribes . . . That’s the power of messaging that really meets that moment of a perfect storm, or the magic movement moment You had tens of thousands of Indians who, through tremendous sacrifice, came to Standing Rock. They needed to be there to stand with Standing Rock.”

— *Judith LeBlanc*

(Caddo), Executive Director, Native Organizers Alliance



The Movement Combined Tribal Leadership with Grassroots Advocacy

Although the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, as a Tribal Nation, began expressing its opposition to the proposed path for the pipeline in early 2015, the Tribe's opposition would likely have not made its way from the courtroom to the living rooms of millions without the incredible grassroots advocacy that began on the ground in Cannonball.

“You cannot interrupt the narrative without that grassroots component...there were grassroots folks at Standing Rock who understood the very clear danger to sacred sites as well as to the water supply of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The chairman and the tribal council understood that the grassroots [movement] was demanding their leadership, and they stood with the grassroots leadership in trying to prevent the building of this pipeline.”

—Judith LeBlanc, (Caddo Nation), Executive Director, Native Organizers Alliance

On April 24, 2016, a group of youth from Standing Rock left Cannonball, North Dakota, to run all the way to Omaha, Nebraska, to deliver a petition to Colonel Henderson at the Army Corps of Engineers. The petition that the youth carried from Cannonball contained 457,000 signatures and demanded that the Army Corps refrain from granting Dakota Access LLC the easement the company needed to construct the pipeline across the Missouri River.

And when that didn't work, they ran to the President. On July 15, 2016, thirty runners set out from the Sacred Stone Camp to run over two thousand miles to the White House and demand that President Obama stop the pipeline. They delivered a petition with more than 160,000 signatures to the Army Corps of Engineers asking that the pipeline not be built next to their reservation.



Photography Credit: Taliesin Gilkes Bower



For Hollywood celebrity Shailene Woodley, the youth's call to action was a call she could not ignore:

For me the things that had the greatest impact were the run that the youth did from Standing Rock all the way to Washington DC to deliver the petition with over 100,000 signatures That, to me held so much gravity and so much importance, even if it was – even if simply on a spiritual level It was the call to the universe. It was – whatever you want to call it to acknowledge that they were not going to stop until this pipeline was finished – or until this pipeline was cancelled, was out . . . And to be honest they didn't – that's what's so powerful about it; they didn't do it for the attention. They did it for the power of it, for spiritual reasons. And I think that really helped – that run that they did created the space and the container for the rest of Standing Rock and NoDAPL to happen. Those are huge, huge moments.

The power of this grassroots advocacy was cemented by the strong support of Standing Rock's Tribal leadership. Again, this combination created an incredibly compelling call for action, one that truly resonated for Woodley. She further explained

that she “heard about the ‘Respect Our Water’ campaign . . . started by the youth of Standing Rock.” According to Woodley, the fact that the youth's efforts were “nurtured and supported by [the] Tribal leadership of Standing Rock [was] . . . the reason that [she] felt compelled to participate and do everything [she] could to help.” As Nick Tilsen explained, often times in movements, “The activists and the Tribal leaders [remain] separate.” One key distinction at Standing Rock, therefore, was “the fact that [former Chairman] Dave [Archambault] and the Tribe was taking a stance on this as a Tribe, and...there w[ere] activists there.”

Instead of carrying out separate activities, activists and tribal leaders stood together. According to LeBlanc, “that created the perfect storm.”

“The grassroots element of the movement was also powerful because it was led by the values of the community. At a time when the country was experiencing so much division, especially in, since the 2016 election, every community [wa]s yearning for that values-led feeling that we must do something,” explained LeBlanc. Ultimately, “one of the big lessons coming out of Standing Rock is that it's going to take everyone playing their role, from policy people to tribal leadership, to spiritual leadership, to community-based organizers, to just random individuals who are drawn into initiatives. Everybody has a role.”



Photography Credit: Taliesin Gilkes Bower

“The grassroots element of the movement was also powerful because it was led by the values of the community. At a time when the country was experiencing so much division... every community [wa]s yearning for that values-led feeling that we must do something”

—Judith LeBlanc



The Movement Created the Largest Unification of Tribal Nations in Modern History

As *Democracy Now!*'s Amy Goodman noted, “this was the largest unification of Native American Tribes from Latin America, and the United States, and the First Nations of Canada that we have seen in decades.” In total, 360 Tribal Nations passed resolutions in support of Standing Rock. Many showed up, bringing their elected leadership, supplies, and citizens to stand with Standing Rock. The sheer number of Tribal Nations and individuals who came to Cannonball, North Dakota to stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe garnered unprecedented attention on social media, in mainstream media, and around the world.

Ultimately, “[I]t was all about Tribal sovereignty with other Tribes,” stated Jodi Gillette. Instead of looking exclusively to the United States to honor and recognize the sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, hundreds of sovereign Tribal Nations engaged in diplomatic relations and recognized their full sovereignty as nation states.

Each Tribal Nation that came to stand with Standing Rock brought their Nation's flag. When turning into the camp off of Highway 1806, one of the first things you would see were the flags of 356 Tribal Nations that lined the entrance to the camp. Many reflected on the power of this image, and as Hollywood celebrity Sol Guy stated, “[t]he significance of the flags” was not lost on him or anyone who entered the camp. As Shailene Woodley reflected, “when all of the flags went up at big camp and all of a sudden you see every single Nation represented who was there and standing in solidarity. That was a physical marker of just how wide the message of water is life is and also just how powerful the ability to unite can be.”

Steve Sitting Bear (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) explained that the arrival of the 356 flags came about in a grassroots, organic fashion. In August 2016, they were “try[ing] to arrange a meeting with the President and the First Lady. But the people

in the White House were asking ‘well, how many Tribes support what they’re doing?’” As a result, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe “put out that call to action for resolutions and letters of support.”

Reid Walker (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation), former director of communication for the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, stated, “The beauty of this movement was that the Tribes from across the nation mobilized and helped support it.”

What happened next could not have been predicted. As Steve Sitting Bear stated: “To be perfectly honest, I thought we would get, you know, maybe 20-30 Tribes that were actually going to do something. But when we sent that out, I think by the end of... we had over 360 Tribes that had done that. So that was organic. We didn’t expect that, it just happened and [then the movement] just grew even more.” The solidarity of 360 Tribal Nations inspired the grassroots activists, provided immeasurable support to the elected leadership of Standing Rock at the time, and amplified the Movement’s messaging around the inherent sovereign right of a Tribal Nation to protect its water, treaty lands, sacred sites, and burials.

This exercise of sovereignty also brought about healing. It seemed that just about every Tribal Nation that entered the camp to stand with Standing Rock had a story to tell about a time when the Army Corps—or another federal agency—had denied that Nation the right to protect its sacred sites, burial grounds, or water. As Jodi Gillette later reflected, this exposed hurt and trauma that had, until then, been painfully silenced or erased. “When you have a lot of victims in the same space and they all share their stories about the same kind of abuse from the same perpetrator, it’s very powerful,” stated Gillette.

As Judith LeBlanc reflected: “We won, because we built a level of unity and collaboration and reciprocity among hundreds of Tribes, which has never been done before in history.”

Suddenly, the Movement became an exercise of the sovereignty the United States had sought to—but failed to—completely eradicate.



“The beauty of this movement was that the Tribes from across the nation mobilized and helped support it.”

—Reid Walker

(Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation), former director of communication for the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs



THE MOVEMENT LEVERAGED THE POWER OF SOCIAL AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, COMBINED WITH ADVOCACY WITH CELEBRITIES, TO FORCE COVERAGE BY MAINSTREAM MEDIA.

The incredible, and international, amplification of the Movement would not have been possible without social media and alternative media. In line with the historic erasure of Native Peoples, mainstream media initially, and for quite some time, refused to report on the Standing Rock Movement. But “[As] Native Americans defined their own struggles, you saw the white corporate media struggling to change their coverage as well – or being forced to,” commented *Democracy Now!*’s Amy Goodman.

“Social media became a powerful, a powerful tool for many of our leaders to be able to speak to a broader cross-section than they ever have. You know, we’re talking millions, heard from elected and traditional spiritual leaders on a regular basis for months

through social media. It’s pretty powerful, very powerful. It’s probably never happened in history, and it’s due to the role that social media plays.”

—Judith LeBlanc

The first mainstream journalist to cover the movement, MSNBC’s Lawrence O’Donnell, later reflected on what prompted his coverage. It was, quite simply: “One word. It was the word trespassing.” Lawrence O’Donnell shared that he “read a small item about the protest. . . . it said that if the protests continued that the protestors would be arrested for trespassing. And it was just so stunning to me that the descendants of the very first people to ever set foot on that land would be arrested by the invaders of that land for trespassing. It just seems that the one thing that Native

Americans should never, ever be arrested for would be trespassing. And that was the word that grabbed me in the first article that I read about it.” Thus it was not necessarily the substance of the legal battle or “the history of the pipeline project in that article” that inspired him into action. Instead, “it was really just that word, that word trespassing that made me do my first piece about this,” on August 25, 2016.

Lawrence O'Donnell's short monologue on August 25 created a huge reaction on social media. He later recollected that “It was the shortest thing in the show, and it got a really kind of explosive reaction on Twitter and on social media. And that was fascinating to me because there were two kinds of reactions. First, the surprise and outrage by people who were learning about this for the first time. And then the other far more interesting reaction, to me, was from people who knew a lot more about it than I did who were already out there [from] different Tribes . . . who I discovered on Twitter and on social media who had much more knowledge about this. And so I started to feed off of that, and it became this dynamic exchange through social media between my show and the people who were way ahead of me on this.”

Just eight days on the heels of Lawrence O'Donnell's introduction of the Movement to mainstream media, Amy Goodman and *Democracy Now!* filmed the dog attacks on September 3, the Saturday of Labor Day weekend 2016—when Dakota Access LLC purposefully bulldozed and destroyed the twenty-seven burials that Standing Rock's former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Tim Mentz had described in the affidavit he filed in Court the day before on September 2. Combined with Lawrence O'Donnell's monologue from one week before, this coverage made it impossible for the mainstream media to continue to ignore the movement at Standing Rock. Comedian and committed conservation activist Dallas Goldtooth remarked that “*Democracy Now!* really kind of took it to a whole new level after the [dog] attacks and there was a good fortune to have them there during that day. . . . [T]heir presence and journalism, you know, really opened – and I guess sent the invitation for traditional media to start covering the story.”

Indeed, Amy Goodman's coverage of the dog attacks inspired many Americans to connect the current attacks on Standing Rock citizens and allies to the atrocities committed against Civil Rights activists and leaders just a few decades before in Alabama. As Nick Tilson stated: “If you're watching violence, you know, [and] what you're watching is one-way violence. In Birmingham, Alabama they turned – the last time in this country that – I remember making the comparison – that last time that police or law enforcement turned dogs on to innocent people in this country was in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1960s.”

National religious leaders like Reverend Jesse Jackson immediately made this comparison, and in October 2016, Reverend Jackson issued a public statement on social media (Facebook), making a strong parallel between the Civil Rights movement of the 60s and the 70s and the movement at Standing Rock:

The members of Standing Rock Sioux Tribe began their movement to protect their waters with prayer.

In 1968, we began a movement with prayer. At the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, we prayed we would create an America where everyone is treated with respect and dignity—regardless of race, regardless of class.

The Civil Rights Movement was, in every respect, a spiritual movement.

Standing Rock's movement is, in every respect, a spiritual movement.

The Tribe has gathered in prayer and peaceful ceremony to oppose an oil pipeline that threatens to desecrate their water and sacred sites—indeed, their spiritual identity. Like the Civil Rights Movement, Standing Rock's movement has attracted supporters from across the country and across the globe.

Just as we in the civil rights movement sought respect and equality, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe asks that

the burial places of their ancestors be afforded respect equal to that we give non-Native cemeteries.

As our movement brought families and children to the streets of the South, Standing Rock's movement has galvanized young people who will not abide the federal government's disregard for their right to drink clean water and visit sacred sites.

Like our prayerful movement nearly fifty years ago, Standing Rock's movement has been met with violence and

diverse viewpoints. Social media was essential for getting reports out to a global audience."

As Dallas Goldtooth explained, "social media allowed immediate direct one-on-one access and kind of this perception of unfiltered access – unfiltered access to what was happening on the ground." And thus when asked to compare Standing Rock to other historic Native-led movements like Wounded Knee and Alcatraz, Reid Walker (MHA Nation) stated that "The biggest difference now is that anybody with a phone with a camera on it is a media representative now. And images and issues can be spun around the globe in a matter of seconds now. So you can amplify and gain mass faster than

“‘citizen journalism was absolutely critical for providing access to breaking news stories as well as the diverse viewpoints. Social media was essential for getting reports out to a global audience.’”

—Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*

racism. In the 1960's, peaceful protesters were branded mobs by elected officials and law enforcement. Today, peaceful protesters at Standing Rock are labeled thugs, portrayed as "other" and foreign.

I've watched as the nonviolent demonstrators at Standing Rock have been attacked by snarling security guard dogs hired by the Dakota Access Pipeline—a scene reminiscent of the attacks on nonviolent civil rights marchers in Birmingham.

Thus, in addition to alternative media, social media brought the Standing Rock movement's message to millions who otherwise would have never heard it. As *Democracy Now!*'s Amy Goodman stated, "citizen journalism was absolutely critical for providing access to breaking news stories as well as the

you ever could have back then." As Judith LeBlanc reflected, social media "gave an opportunity for people, grassroots folks, to show, to explain, to talk, to challenge people to think about why we must, we must take such a . . . stand to stop the pipeline from being built. And, the social media was, I think, critical to the traditional media coverage, because as we can see from Trump, Twitter matters, Facebook matters."

Finally the messaging ("Water is Life" and "Stand With Standing Rock" among a few others) was amplified by a combination of highly effective tribal leader messengers, community members, key media personalities, and highly influential celebrities—such as Shailene Woodley, Chris Hemsworth, Ezra Miller, Mark Ruffalo, Ava DuVernay, Michael Moore, Rosario Dawson, Katy Perry, Solange Knowles and Saturday Night Live personalities, including a skit on "Weekend Update" with Colin Hanks, Michael Che and Tina Fey.

The connection to celebrities was, truly, another outgrowth of the grassroots Movement, since, as Jodi Gillette explained, the first celebrities to arrive at Standing Rock and truly stand in solidarity came through a connection to a Standing Rock citizen, DJ Two Bears:

We were able to reach the millennials through the movie stars – Shailene Woodley and (I always call him Flash Gordon) Ezra Miller – all of these superstars and that was through Sol and DJ – really DJ Two Bears from a local perspective and Sol because he’s the one who’s connected. So you had Shailene Woodley, who just came off of a very successful stint with “Divergent”, talking about water, who was talking directly to millennials saying that this was a very important thing. Ezra was filming the Justice League as Flash Gordon with all of these other people and so it became very easy . . .

- Jodi Gillette

These celebrities were able to reach the millennials and people with no other ties or connections to Tribal Nations or Indian Country. Working together with grassroots Native activists and tribal leaders, they were able to break centuries of silence and amplify a message of sovereignty and solidarity that, to date, had been erased from the dominant American narrative.

This conclusion is supported by the work of the *Reclaiming Native Truth* (RNT) project, who in the spring of 2017 conducted 28 focus groups with diverse demographics in 10 States and monitored more than 300 social media channels. This research conclusively found one agreed upon conclusion: Standing Rock made a lasting impression on an unprecedented swath of the American public. The majority of focus group participants nationwide not only referenced Standing Rock but voiced their support for the Tribe to defend its rights to the land and water, as well as the rights of all to safe and clean drinking water. These findings cut across all demographics, including gender, political affiliation, race and geography. Standing Rock and the power of social media captured the imaginations and interest of a broad sector of American society and the world. Standing Rock dominated the conversations about Native Americans as evidenced by RNT’s social media research, particularly between August-December 2017 and January 2018.²

² For more information see <https://www.reclaimingnativetruth.com/research/>





GOING FORWARD

New narratives alone are not enough. They must connect with grassroots organizing, tribal leadership, and individuals who have significant influence in American culture at large.

Going forward, we must build upon the newfound place Native Americans now hold in the American consciousness, a place we hold because the Standing Rock Movement successfully penetrated the historic erasure surrounding Native Peoples in the United States. As Judith LeBlanc reminds us: “In order for us to not only just interrupt the narrative, but to strengthen the little crack that we made in the narrative, we have to find a lot of different ways to get those stories told.”

Ultimately, Standing Rock powerfully interrupted and disrupted prevailing negative narratives and the erasure of Native peoples. The new narrative pushed out by Standing Rock became truly powerful and transformative when it combined with:

1. Messaging that was authentic, organic and resonated first and foremost with the values of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s leadership (traditional and elected), Native youth and Native peoples;
2. The unity of more than 360 Tribes;
3. Connections and working with unprecedented grassroots mobilization at the Camp, nationally and globally; and
4. Social media, and “citizen” and/or “participatory” journalists who worked with celebrities to force a level of national and global consciousness and forced editors across mainstream newsrooms to stop saying that “nobody cares about Native stories because they constitute a very small and ‘insignificant’ audience.” Without a doubt, alternative media was also a major force.

New narratives alone are not enough. They must connect with grassroots organizing, tribal leadership, and individuals who have significant influence in American culture at large (for example, celebrities like Shailene Woodley or Mark Ruffalo).

Standing Rock created an opening that is fading rapidly. We must put out the call to make a case for influencers, philanthropy, and investment in telling stories like

Standing Rock and other “Native Truths” today. The time is now to build upon the lessons learned at Standing Rock and invest in creating capacity across Indian Country on a range of issues and infrastructure of trust amongst Tribes, their citizens, and allies in order to truly build upon the lessons learned and new ground forged.

To learn more about the *Reclaiming Native Truth* project and additional research conducted for this project, visit www.ReclaimingNativeTruth.com.

Photography Credit: Josue Rivas





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16. **Shailene Woodley**, Actress and activist



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