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In the shadow of unprecedented geopolitical turbulence and global transformation, Native Nations find themselves at a pivotal moment: defining the next era of Native Nation Sovereignty.

Native American sovereignty predates European contact, manifesting through complex systems of governance, territorial control, economic integration and trade, knowledge transfer, and inter-tribal relations. In this era of profound change, Native Nations have an exceptional opportunity to expand beyond mere sovereignty to achieve significance on a global scale. While sovereignty has established the right to self-determination, significance demonstrates the ability to execute, influence, contribute, and shape the future for those waiting to enter this world.

Native Nations have a chance to transcend traditional boundaries of sovereignty, evolving from a mindset of survival, protectionism, isolation, resistance, and the need to continuously assert sovereign status, to one centered on innovation, economic integration, energy and economic leadership, and becoming a valued and significant ally of the U.S.

Today's generation of Native leaders do not inherit the "right" to sovereignty; they inherit the "responsibilities" of sovereignty. The contemporary Native Nation leader stands at the intersection of ancient wisdom and future possibilities, equipped with both traditional knowledge and modern capabilities. This convergence creates an unprecedented opportunity for Native Nations to emerge as global players and leaders in sustainable development, economic and energy integration, cultural preservation, engagement and empowerment of citizen innovators, and state-of-the-art governance systems.

The question is no longer simply how to maintain sovereign rights, but how to exercise the responsibilities to achieve lasting significance in a rapidly evolving world. The answer lies in embracing our role not just as sovereign entities, but as significant global actors whose influence extends far beyond territorial boundaries to shape the very future of humanity.

The Sovereignty Paradox

Native Nations have long understood that sovereignty is inherent, not granted. The unique political and legal relationship Native Nations hold with the United States is rooted in this inherent sovereignty and is recognized in the U.S. Constitution, treaties, and various federal laws and policies.¹ However, this distinctive political and legal relationship creates a paradox: while the U.S. acknowledges Native Nation sovereignty, it simultaneously constrains it within the federal system. Through these legislative acts and executive decisions, the U.S. often dictates the limits of Native Nation sovereignty.²

The complexity of sovereignty is compounded by the concept of the "degree" of sovereignty. Federal funding has become a lifeline for numerous Native Nations; however, excessive reliance on such funding can dilute the degree of sovereignty a Native Nation has. An observation shared by a Native Federal Government Contracting CEO—that "you are only as sovereign as you can afford to be"—underscores this imbalance between sovereignty and dependence. Similar to the blood quantum issue, the commodification of sovereignty affects the degree of sovereignty. When sovereignty is fragmented and applied to various aspects, such as data sovereignty, food sovereignty, and economic sovereignty, there is a risk that sovereignty becomes reduced to bureaucratic checkboxes rather than representing a holistic and inherent power.^{3, 4}

Reimagining Sovereignty for Future Generations

For sovereignty to be meaningful and enduring for future generations, a critical shift must occur in how we conceptualize and practice it. It must be redefined beyond governmental structures. Native Nation sovereignty has traditionally focused on the tribal government, often limiting or excluding individual citizens from its benefits and responsibilities. In reimagining sovereignty, some key questions, not all inclusive, must be asked such as "Who decides Sovereignty, and for who?", "How do Native Nations move beyond dependency?", "What does individual sovereignty look like?", "How can sovereignty be a power multiplier for economic prosperity?". However, achieving this reimagined sovereignty will require economic integration, education, cultural infrastructure, and intergenerational collaboration, as well as innovation, boldness, and governance structures that reflect the needs and aspirations of future generations.

To strengthen sovereignty, Native Nations must move beyond simply existing as "administrative entities" and evolve into genuine Nationhood. It can be argued that many practices, mindsets, and models of contemporary tribal administrative entities are rooted in the outdated recommendations of the Problem of Indian Administration outlined in the 1928 Meriam Report⁵. The sovereignty of the next generation of Native Nations will require innovative, rather than

¹ Letter to President Donald Trump titled: "RE: Status of Tribal Nations as Political Entities in the Implementation of the President's New Executive Orders", February 2nd, 2025

² Tribal Sovereignty and Legal Implications, <https://www.justia.com/native-american-law/tribal-sovereignty/>

³ Beyond Sovereignty: New Solutions for Self-Determination | Bioneers
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo9MRvUDWxM>)

⁴ Blood Quantum and Sovereignty: A Guide (<https://nativegov.org/resources/blood-quantum-and-sovereignty-a-guide/>)

⁵ 1928 Meriam Report – The Problem of Indian Administration, General Summary of Findings and Recommendations

prescriptive, solutions; curiosity, not merely compliant thinking; creative ideas that defy conventional boundaries; and empowerment instead of paternalistic engagement.

The path forward demands innovative and transformative thinking, strategic action, and the courage to envision a future where Native Nations are not just sovereign within their territories but significant on the global stage. Success will require leveraging traditional knowledge and values while embracing new and unconventional opportunities for global impact and leadership. Through this transformation, Native Nations can create a future where their influence extends far beyond their borders, contributing to the advancement of humanity while maintaining their unique cultural identities and sovereign rights.

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The Native American Mining and Energy Sovereignty (NAMES) Initiative offers a fresh collaborative approach, supported by novel lines of communication, to take on the challenges of mineral and energy development in Indian Country. Working with tribal governments, reservation communities, industry leaders and government agencies, NAMES offers our tribal partners unprecedented information access through a variety of collaborative events, including: Large symposiums on broad tribal and industry subjects, Single-topic focused workshops, Small group facilitated stakeholder meetings.

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