

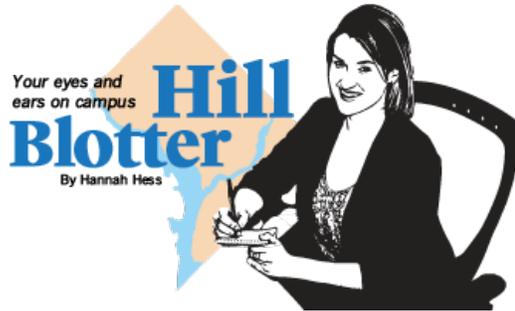


ROLL CALL

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Treaties Exhibit Ushers in 10 Years of American Indian Museum

By **Bridget Bowman**

Posted at 5 a.m. on Sept. 19

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Indigenous leaders from the Cowboy and Indian Alliance participate in a Capitol Hill protest in April. (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call File Photo)

The National Museum of the American Indian will open its first exhibit exploring the contentious issue of treaties between the U.S. government and Indian nations next week.

"This exhibit is a tangible reminder of the federal government's relationship with sovereign tribal nations of this country," Senate Indian Affairs Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., said Thursday. "It's also a reminder of the moral and legal obligations that the United States has to honor and uphold our treaties with Indian country."

Tester addressed a group gathered at a day-long symposium at the museum discussing the exhibit. "Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations" opened on Sunday, the 10th anniversary of the opening of the museum. The exhibit will continue until the fall of 2018.

Museum Director Kevin Gover said during a preview Tuesday the display was years in the making and came at the request of a number of tribes and members of Congress.

Gover said one of those members pushing for the exhibit was retiring Rep. James P. Moran,

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Campus Reporter **Bridget Bowman** (@bridgetbhc) keeps her eye what's happening on and around the Hill. She covers local elections, the Capitol Hill community, House and Senate administration, legislative agencies and congressional oversight over the District of Columbia.

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D-Va., who spoke with Gover about a treaty exhibit when he was chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees Smithsonian museums.

“There was a time when the American Indian Museum looked like a glorified arts fair,” Moran told CQ Roll Call on Wednesday. “And I think it should be an instrument for teaching and generating some empathy and understanding of the way this country has exploited its Native American population, taken their land and their resources.”

Moran said he would probably visit the exhibit soon. When he does, he will be sure to find an display that demonstrates how Native Americans have struggled to secure their rights under treaties.

And, as the end of the exhibit displays in crisp white letters on a deep purple wall, “The struggle continues.”

Each of the four sections in the exhibit highlights a few treaties centered around a theme and time period. At each turn, the displays also provide American Indian and European viewpoints side-by-side to show both perspectives of the treaty process.

“Their perspectives were vastly different, and in some cases it’s just miraculous that a peaceful resolution was found,” Gover said.

Museum visitors can also view nine of the original treaty documents over the course of the next few years. The treaties will be on loan from the National Archives and displayed on a rotating basis.

The first document on display is the Treaty of Canandaigua from 1794 and bears the signature, “G. Washington.”

The original document welcomes visitors to the first section titled “Serious Diplomacy,” which focuses on early treaties.

Each of the sections is a circular room with a gigantic replica of a two-row wampum belt suspended from the ceiling. The belt is a symbol of the first treaty with Europeans and the two rows signify that Indian and European nations were equal, sovereign nations.

The next section titled “Bad Acts, Bad Paper” explores a dark time in the 1800s, when the U.S. government forcibly acquired land through the treaty process and removed American Indians from their native land.

Visitors next walk to “Great Nations Keep Their Word,” a section that documents how Indians united to use treaties to assert their rights. The final section is titled “The Future of Treaties,” showing that the treaty process is ongoing and that American citizens are also affected by the agreements.

Congress is a focus of third section, which details Indian nations traveling to Washington to lobby lawmakers.

In the center of the circular room, a video narrated by Robert Redford plays on repeat, showing clips of Native American leaders and politicians, including former President Bill Clinton, speaking about Indian nations.

Some of the exhibit’s 125 artifacts are displayed in this section as well.

A gavel adorned with beads hangs in a glass case along the wall. The gavel belonged to the late Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, who was the first non-white lawmaker to be chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee.

Tester, the current chairman, said the committee continues to foster the relationship between the 566 sovereign American Indian tribes and the U.S. government.

“Our mission is to uphold these treaties and ensure tribes not only survive but thrive,” Tester said, though he noted that there is still much work to be done. He later added, “We are woefully under serving and underfunding our obligations to Indian country.”

Tester’s presence at the symposium was welcomed and encouraged by the museum staff, since lawmakers play a central role in negotiations with Native American tribes.

“This [exhibit] is about the relationship between the United States and the tribes,” said Gover. “And so there should be representatives of both the United States and the tribes.”

Gover said he hoped citizens will walk away from the exhibit with a sense of ownership for the relationship between the United States and Indian Nations.

He also said he hoped lawmakers will use the exhibit as an opportunity to educate themselves about the treaties of the past and their responsibilities for the future.

“Congress is making decisions all the time that deeply impact Indian country,” Gover said. “And

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our job is not to push for a particular policy outcome. But hopefully we can inform that conversation with exhibitions like this.”

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