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U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland addresses the Tribal Nations Summit from an auditorium

U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland addresses the Tribal Nations Summit from an auditorium on the White House campus in Washington Nov. 15, 2021. (Reuters/CNS photo/Jonathan Ernst)

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When Deb Haaland was chosen as the secretary of the Interior by President Joe Biden in 2021, she was the first Native American ever to serve in the U.S. Cabinet. It was a seminal moment for tribal citizens: For more than 150 years, the Interior Department had been the arm of the U.S. government in charge of managing relationships with tribes, which included executing its colonial agenda. The agency helped oversee forced assimilation of Native children through federal boarding

schools, where children taken from their parents were barred from speaking their Indigenous languages. Today, the department is best known for managing more than 85 million acres of national parks, many of which sit on land stolen from tribal nations.

The agency's mandate is broad: It also oversees federal mining permits, national monuments and sanctuaries, and federal wildlife refuges, making critical decisions about conservation and mining that have implications for global biodiversity and carbon emissions. It is charged with managing U.S. relationships with island territories like Guam and Puerto Rico, and fulfilling federal trust obligations to tribal governments, including funding for health care and education. Most recently, the agency has funneled money to tribes to help them with climate change adaptation and, in some cases, relocation.

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When Haaland, an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, was tapped to lead the agency, she was serving as a congressional representative for New Mexico.

"A voice like mine has never been a Cabinet secretary or at the head of the Department of Interior," Haaland said in 2021 ahead of her congressional confirmation vote. "Growing up in my mother's Pueblo household made me fierce. I'll be fierce for all of us, our planet, and all of our protected land."

Four years later, as Haaland's tenure ends, her presence in the Interior Department has led to greater collaboration with tribal nations and broader awareness of America's crimes against its Indigenous peoples. She launched the Indian Boarding School Initiative, which produced an investigative report on the boarding schools and led to an official apology from Biden. Under her leadership, the Interior Department has executed more than 400 co-stewardship agreements to enable Indigenous peoples to have more of a say over their ancestral lands. Haaland also pushed for historic funding for tribal nations and stronger consultation with Indigenous leaders.

But not everything Haaland and the Biden administration have done has been heralded by environmental and Indigenous advocates. Biden reneged on his campaign promise of no new drilling to approve the Willow Project, which opened vast swaths of Alaska for oil drilling and is expected to add more than 249 million

tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere over the next three decades. And while progress on co-stewardship and co-management agreements have been welcomed by tribal nations, some continue to question whether the administration has done enough to prioritize returning land back into trust.

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Grist spoke with Haaland about her experience and what she hopes her legacy will be. This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Q: What do you hope your legacy will be? What part of it are you most proud of?

A: One of those pieces (of my legacy) is the Boarding School Initiative. Nothing had ever been done like that before. This was an era of American history that a lot of mainstream Americans didn't know about. Indian Country knew about it, and it plagued us. It was generational trauma that so many tribal communities have suffered. But we brought attention to that. We will continue to shine a light on it. And I hope, in a way, that we've been able to bring about healing as a result of all of the work that we have done.

Q: What was the hardest part of your job?

A: There are so many decisions that are difficult. I can't really think of one in particular. Some folks don't realize that there's a process to everything, and there's so much that you have to consider when you are making a decision. It's particularly difficult when you have communities on either side of an issue: One is saying, Please do this. The other one is saying, Please don't do this. Those are hard decisions to make, right? I promised that I would manage the Department of the Interior and our public lands in a balance. And so, I feel like I've really tried to do that.

Q: At the time that the Willow project was approved, news reports said it was a difficult decision for you to make. Looking back, what do you think about the approval of that project? Do you have any regrets?

A: That was definitely a difficult decision — folks on one side of the issue and other people on the other side of the issue. I think that in the end, the people of Alaska spoke. This wasn't a new project that just popped up during the Biden administration. There had been contracts that had been signed in years past. It had

been going through this process for like 20 years. And so by the time it came to us, it was just really time to make a decision. And there were valid existing rights that we had to consider. We have laws in our country. Contract laws are our contract laws. And when people have valid existing rights, you have to consider those. In the end, I feel like we did what needed to be done at the time.

Q: The Biden administration has been praised for improving the tribal consultation processes for so many projects, but there are still many that are proceeding against the wishes of the Indigenous peoples. For example, the Dakota Access pipeline, Line 3, even mining at Oak Flat. What would you tell our readers who are concerned about those projects moving forward, and are disappointed that they're still moving forward even under your tenure?

A: Just to be clear, we (the Interior Department) don't have a say in those projects at all. But with respect to the projects that we have, we have to move forward. We have really worked hard to make sure that tribes have a voice. You're never going to have 100 percent consensus. There's tribes who are for it. There's tribes who are against the tribes. They're not a monolith. They don't all think the same. They don't all speak the same. So the public comment periods and the processes that we have in place for these issues, we really just encourage people to make sure that they are using the process to their best ability.

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Q: Recently, you announced a new plan to preserve and revitalize Native languages, counteracting years of systemic suppression. This was exciting to a lot of advocates who've been fighting for this, and is particularly timely as climate change threatens Indigenous languages. But where will this money come from now that we're facing a Republican-controlled Congress and a second Trump administration?

A: Congress holds the purse strings. And so this would be an issue for Congress to take up. And our hope is that there will be enough members of Congress who recognize that this is something worthy of our country getting behind. Something that united all of those communities is that they said, over and over again, Our language was not lost. It was stolen from us. Native languages encompass so much more than just communication. It includes geography. It includes tradition and

culture. COVID really worked against the preservation of Native languages, because so many elders passed away during the pandemic. And so it is an urgent issue.

Q: To clarify, there's no guarantee that this will be funded under the new administration, right? What do you expect its future will be, knowing that such funding is unlikely over the next four years?

A: I was a member of the House, so I recognize how difficult sometimes it is to get things passed through the Congress. But it doesn't mean you stop trying. And so, as I have told many of my career staff, I'm going to be cheering for them from the sidelines. I think many people across the country and across Indian Country will be pushing the Native language plan forward and hoping that they can convince members of Congress that it is worthy of Congress' support.

Q: The Biden administration facilitated more than 400 co-stewardship agreements, which many communities are happy about. At the same time, there are also a lot of people who have been calling for land to be returned back to tribes through the landback movement, putting land back into trust for their Native nations. What would you say to those who think you've prioritized co-stewardship over landback? Looking back, what have you accomplished in terms of landback?

A: I don't think we've prioritized co-stewardship agreements over landback. If tribes want land into trust, they contact us — there's a process that it goes through in order to put land into trust for tribes. It's a continuous process. We have put a lot of land into trust for tribes. But it is up to the tribes. We are upholding the trust and treaty obligations of our nation's 574 federally recognized tribes. If the tribes want something, they contact us, we work on it. I understand how important it is for tribes to have their land into trust. And of course, if that's what the tribes want, they come to us and we work on helping them in any way we can.

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Q: We're facing a Republican-controlled Congress and the Trump presidency. What parts of your legacy do you think can withstand those forces and prevent being reversed?

A: Under the Investing in America agenda, President Biden moved $45 billion into Indian country, and that has been used to make the lives of tribal folks better across the country. That is not getting clawed back. We have the Federal Boarding School Initiative that is now in an oral history project stage. President Biden made an apology to Indian Country. He signed a proclamation for a national monument for the boarding schools. He's apologized. There's no taking that back.

You might have heard of Governor Lewis (of the Gila River Indian Community) with an amazing solar energy project on his tribal lands. These are all things that happened under this administration. And so it would be difficult to claw things like that back. I'll mention one last thing to you: The (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Regulations) regulations: We consulted with tribes. They told us what they wanted. We got those across the finish line. These are all enduring things, enduring progress that we have been able to actually complete during this administration.

What will the next administration do? It's hard for me to think about hypotheticals. But I can tell you, what I hope is that the career staff will continue to do their amazing work, that tribes will continue to have a voice in their federal government, and that we'll all be able to continue to move these important issues forward.

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