

Statement By

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Before the

**Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives**

Legislative Hearing

[S. 789](#) *(Sen. Mike Rounds, R-SD), To repeal certain obsolete laws relating to Indians. “Repealing Existing Substandard Provisions Encouraging Conciliation with Tribes Act.”*

April 27, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Leger-Fernandez, Ranking Member Obernolte, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 789, the *Repealing Existing Substandard Provisions Encouraging Conciliation with Tribes Act*, also known as the RESPECT Act.

I wish to thank Senator Rounds who represents my beloved state of South Dakota for providing the leadership on this important legislation. The RESPECT Act can be a base for further work to amend or change federal policies that limit the progress of Native Nations and indigenous people in the United States of America.

Many of us in the Great Plains, and across the country, are excited to see this RESPECT Act finally receive a hearing in the United States House of Representatives. My understanding is this legislation originated out of tribal consultations when Senator Rounds' staff was working with Sioux Tribes, located in present-day South Dakota, on Carlisle Indian School repatriation efforts. I have often heard it described as being a rare, non-partisan, non-controversial, and no-cost piece of legislation. I thank all of you for giving this legislation the opportunity to be heard.

REMARKS

In 2018, I was elected to my first term in the South Dakota House of Representatives. The day that I stepped onto the floor of the State House, I looked up and saw a painting of the sort that is commonly found in many State Capitals, and done during a time when life was very different in South Dakota. It depicts the typical images of immigrants during the settlement of what was Native homelands for centuries. In the painting above my desk on the House floor, is a Native woman with braids covering her bare chest. There also exists a similar painting of non-tribal women in another location at the Capitol and neither would likely be chosen today to portray the women of South Dakota.

It was very clear to me that this place wasn't built with me in mind. As a woman in the United States during the late 1800's and early 1900's, I would not have been able to vote until the passing of the 19th amendment. As a Native American, I would not have been considered a United States Citizen until 1924. So as a society, we continue to grow and change as needed.

In America, when we know better, we do better.

Senate Bill 789 does just that. It represents the acknowledgement of a past that created hardship and even devastation for indigenous people in the United States.

As a historian, when I relay the history of Native Nations it corresponds directly with Federal Indian Policies such as the *Indian Removal Act*. My Dakota tribe was removed from the state of Minnesota in 1863 after the Dakota War where Governor Ramsey called for the extermination of the Dakota.

From that era of Genocide, we moved into a period known as Assimilation. It is from this era that some of the laws identified in the proposed legislation come from. The era of boarding schools where many Dakota children were forcibly removed from homes and families to be placed in schools as far away as Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The impacts of this policy are still found within our families today.

In 1889, one Indian Commissioner numbered several ways in which assimilation would be carried out. Things that separated children from communities and outlawed such things like traditional languages and spirituality. The last paragraph stated that QUOTE “the autonomy of the individual will be enforced above all” END-QUOTE, meaning that a person is stripped bare of all the things that identify them as a Native American or Indian person.

When these children returned home, they often were disconnected from their people and families. As one elder once told me, QUOTE “I knew I did not belong with my people or with white people, I did not belong anywhere,” OR “how do you show love or connection when you’ve never experienced it?” AND “this affected my every relationship from marriage to parent.” END-QUOTE.

These are the same policies that resulted in a loss of spirituality or prayer. Due to the consequences of these antiquated and overtly racist laws against Native Americans, that are still on the federal books today mind you, you can imagine how much Native people have had to overcome in order to be here today.

CONCLUSION

We can’t change the past, but we can recognize that today we as a nation know better, and can do better.

With these things in mind, I ask you to please vote in support Senate Bill 789 and let’s get this legislation to the President’s desk.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tamara D. Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.