

It's Hard to See the Future with Tears in Your Eyes

Wilma Mankiller

To commemorate its 20th anniversary, the American Indian Studies Programs (AISP) at the University of Arizona recently staged a speaker series entitled "Poetics and Politics." Launching the series was Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee), a nationally renowned Native leader, author and community development specialist.

Mankiller first gained national recognition in 1983 when she was elected Deputy Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, one of the largest Indian tribes in the United States. During her first term in office, the Principal Chief resigned and Mankiller became the first female Principal Chief of the Nation. In 1991, she was elected to the position of Principal Chief with nearly 83% of the vote. During her tenure as Principal Chief (1985 to 1995), Mankiller doubled the annual budget, increased health and children's services; meanwhile, the tribe's membership enrollment tripled. Since leaving office, Mankiller has co-authored Mankiller: A Chief and Her People and Keeping Pace With the Rest of the World, and has co-edited the Readers Companion to the History of Women in the U.S.

In addition to her political accomplishments, Mankiller is recognized for her expertise in community development and her and husband Charlie Soap's implementation of community empowerment projects. Her work reflects her mission to make the Cherokee Nation self-sufficient. Mankiller has received a number of honors, including: The 1998 Presidential Medal of Freedom, Who's Who in America, One of the 50 Most Important People in the U.S. 1996, and the National Education Association Leadership Award in 1995. Thirteen colleges and universities have awarded her honorary doctorate degrees, and she serves as a trustee or board member for several institutions, such as the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, The Ford Foundation, Cornell University Indian Publishing, and the University of Maryland Leadership Academy.

Mankiller's "Poetics and Politics" address—which delved into issues of Native leadership, identity and self-sufficiency—is presented below along with excerpts from the Q&A session that followed it.

I am happy to be here. I don't like to give formal lectures. What I am trying to do at this point in my life is talk about the things that share with you some of my own experiences, talk about things that I have thought about or have feelings about for our common interest.

I thought I would talk a little bit about the changing role of Native women. I spent about two years interviewing indigenous women all over the country to see what they are thinking about and what is important to them. I also would have loved to know what women were thinking about specifically one hundred years ago, and what was important to them, how they saw the 20th century and where they were. At the beginning of this century, I wanted to record the voices of Onondaga women, of Shoshone women, of Ojibwe women, of other women—a record for all time, a record of what they had to say, not what an outside writer had to say about them, but what they had to say for themselves. The issue of women has been on my mind, also because I was the first woman to be the elected Deputy Chief in my tribe and first woman to be elected Principal Chief in my tribe. I have been asked a lot of questions about women and women in leadership positions. What's very, very interesting is that when I first ran for election in 1983, my work had been in the more traditional communities. Charlie and I were organizing mostly in bilingual Cherokee communities and what was interesting is that I was doing work that other people might consider not to be the traditional role of a woman. We were building houses, building water lines; I knew how to order a backhoe, I knew how to get things done. People thought it was okay for me to do that but

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when I went to step into a leadership role, there was incredible opposition. To be honest it never occurred to me that there would be opposition simply because I am a female. I thought there would be opposition to me because I was in a conservative part of the state and I had been involved in a lot of activist activities. So I thought that my political background would come up, but I never thought that people would oppose me just because I was female. What happened, though, is that a lot of the older people supported me. Charlie is fluent in Cherokee so he helped me a lot with getting their votes. I would never have been elected without Charlie's help in 1983.

It took us years to figure this out but Charlie and I figured out that the older people probably had heard stories or remembered the time when there was more balance and equity between men and women among our people. As time went on, I learned much more about that and the old days before our people were removed from the southeast to Indian territory—even before we had a lot of contact with non-Cherokee people. At that time, women had a significant role in the tribe, not in title positions, the men held those positions, like as Chief or “Mankiller” (“Mankiller” was the title of a warrior)—those kinds of positions. Back then, women had a lot of pull. They had a women's council. They had one woman who, in the English translation, they called the “beloved” woman, a very respected Cherokee woman that was consulted in matters important to the tribe. When men and women married, the man moved into the woman's place. Women in some ways controlled the economy because they controlled the agriculture. But our people have forgotten that. As we became sort of adapted to the larger society around us, we began to adopt the values of this larger society, and one of those values was that women played a secondary role.

So when I was initially elected in 1983, it was a step forward for women and also a step into our traditions, into our old way of doing things, when we valued the role of women as we valued the role of men, when we regarded both of their courses as important. In Cherokee traditional culture, even today, there is still a lot of talk about balance, there being balance in the world. And when the people want things to be right in the world they talk about balance. One of the most

important aspects of balance in Cherokee traditional culture was the balance between men and women, having to honor women and honor men, having that kind of balance. I think that has changed over the last 15 years. I think we are more and more going back to that time when both the voices of men and women are honored.

America in general, and the women's movement, and the people who are interested in progress for women all over the world are always looking for models of gender equity. They never look at tribal peoples. Most people in the larger society don't think we have anything to say, but if they look at the Iroquois for example, if they look at the Iroquois people, all that they see is that the Iroquois have male chiefs. But what they don't know, because they never take the time to learn, is that the male chiefs are chosen by the women. They're nurtured from young men to become chiefs. The women install them in a special ceremony, and the women can take them out if they don't perform their jobs correctly. So women have a strong role there, but if a stranger just walked in and looked at the situation they would not know about the incredible role of women. In fact one scholar, one recent scholar, has written a book saying that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and some of the early pioneers of the feminist movement met regularly with Iroquois women and came up with ideas from them about how things should be.

I have a lot of Navajo friends. My first boss is Navajo and he was telling me about how Navajo women control the livestock in some places. That's a lot of control—to control the economy in that way. So the women may not be president of the tribe but they certainly have a strong role there. In some of the Ojibway tribes, women trap small animals and hunt and do things like that. So this idea of sexism and discrimination against women—that does not come from our people. That comes from someplace else. So we have now adopted, Indians have adopted, many of the bad characteristics of sexism that come from someplace else, not from our own people.

So I just wanted to share that little bit about women with you and close this section by saying that we had a chief, a Cherokee chief, many, many years ago that would take delegations of people to meet with representatives of the colonies. There were always

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women in these delegations. They may not have been the negotiators or the people up front, but there were always women in these delegations. I remember in a very famous speech that same Cherokee chief asked, "Where are your women? Where are your women?" I think the question for all of us as we enter the 21st century that we need to ask of every institution and every place of business and politics and every area of life where we don't see women is that same question that Cherokee chief asked: "Where are your women?"

Next I want to talk about what I always talk about. I think one of the most important issues that we all face is that there is still, in America, an incredible lack of information about indigenous people. It's absolutely amazing that after all these years of interaction and all these years of living on our traditional lands, after stocking their pharmacies with our medicine, after using our corn, after using ceremonies for pleasure, after all of that, people know very little about us. And what happens to us is that we go to their institutions, we go to their schools, we go to their colleges, we copy their culture, we read their literature and their magazines, and we learn everything about them, we learn everything about the people around us. But they don't know anything about us. They know very little about us. So there are a lot of stereotypes that still prevail. You would be amazed. This may not be the case here in Arizona because there is a good relationship between the indigenous people and the general population, but I can tell you some of the experiences that I have had. I had a reporter from New York once call and ask me if I rode a horse to work. I told him that I left him by my teepee right by the river. [Laughter] I really got him going. He really believed me, so I finally told him that I drive a Ford Taurus station wagon. [Laughter]

I think two of the most common misconceptions is first that we are all alike, and there are some people who believe that there is a common Native American language. I also hear people talk about Native American spirituality. I don't know what that is. There are individual tribal ceremonies and individual spiritualities but there is no overarching Native American spirituality that I am aware of, yet there are people who seem to be making fortunes off of that notion.

Of the over 500 tribal communities in the lower 48 states and Alaska, each one is very different. They have a different language, they have a different history, they have a different way of doing their ceremonies, and they have different priorities. So no one can say that the top priority of all indigenous people is this or is that—everybody has a different priority. Later I'll talk about a couple of things that I think we all share in common that no matter where we go all people care about. But by and large there is a big difference. There are big differences in land bases. Here in Arizona you have the Tohono O'odham Reservation, which has 2.5 million acres. So there's that end of the spectrum and then you go to California, where they have little rancherias, some of which are less than 10 acres. Or you can go to Navajo, where they have over 200,000 enrolled members, and then you see other tribes with less than a hundred members. So there is a wide range of peoples here. Some peoples have traditional tribal governments, some peoples have tribal governments that have changed over time, some have elected tribal governments.

With regards to Native American spirituality, what I try to tell people is that a lot of non-Native people want to take the discrete practices and ceremonies and duplicate them somewhere else. They can't do that because it is a part of a way of living, it is a part of a way of thinking, and it is a part of a way of being. So for the people who are talking about Native American spirituality—it can't be taken away from the people and done in Phoenix or Olympic Park in San Francisco by people who don't have the history or the culture or the knowledge or the reason. I just wanted to make that point.

There are a lot of reasons why I think there is a lack of accurate information about tribal peoples in this country. One is that it's not taught well or enough in school. Every third-grader in the U.S. learns about Columbus as if nothing happened before he stumbled upon our shores. As if there were no people here, there were no governments here. Because of this lack of information, people say, "Where did these tribal governments come from?" Like we just sprung up with the casinos or something. [Laughter] I tell people that tribal governments have been here forever. Even in Lewis and Clark's journey, if

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you look at their original journals, they refer to indigenous people not as individuals but as members of nations. When we did our first treaty with a European country, we were the Cherokee Nation, not individual people signing the treaty. So there's been a long history of governance that most people don't know about. I would go to Congress all of the time when I was principal chief and I would have to do Native American History 101. [Laughter] There were a lot of treaties made between the United States and Indian peoples. Those treaties are still valid. I think we should continue to remind people of the validity of those treaties. They should be honored.

The other issue contributing to the complete lack of information given in the public school systems is the fact that so much of our own histories are passed down through the oral tradition. At some point in American history—I don't know when—Americans began to think that oral history was not real history, that history isn't real unless it is written in a book by a Ph.D. [Laughter] So they don't acknowledge oral history and yet—just to tell you about my own people—a long time ago, we had a person designated with a strong memory whose specific job it was to record major events, big meetings, or some big happening in the community, and for them to remember that and pass it on and pass it on. The other thing that we adopted was the use of wampum belts, which are belts made of purple and white clamshells. They are carefully arranged to memorialize certain events like a treaty or other events of signify value. One of my favorites is the one that tells you how to live, how to live a good life, be a good person. For the people who know what that means and how to interpret the belt, it is a very significant thing. Many other tribal peoples use all kinds of drawings on teepees and rocks—other ways of doing the same thing that the wampum belts did. So we have our own ways of keeping track of history. If we didn't, we would not still be here as tribal peoples today. Because much of our history has been passed on through the oral tradition, it is not available to the general culture. God knows if we made it available to them they would copyright it and sell it. So that information is kept among tribal peoples.

The thing that I see throughout Indian country as I said earlier is a lot of differences in priorities and

goals. But I think it is safe to say that there are two things that most tribal people everywhere are talking about. The first is the exercise of tribal government and tribal sovereignty, which encompasses everything—the need for tribal governments to continue to support and advocate for tribal peoples. Equally important is the issue of trying to figure out how we hold on to a strong sense of who we are as Native people.

For me, no matter where I go, ceremonies, tribal ceremonies, tell us how to live and tell us how to be. Tribal elders tell us how to be as people—to be respectful, to speak peace, to be good to one another, to never hurt children, or men not to harm women—all of the things that people think are important values to our communities. Help each other—that's a big one at home in Oklahoma. In our community, you are not valued when you have a lot of personal wealth or personal accomplishments. People don't care about that; they don't have respect for that. They have respect for people who help other people. Wherever I go, I see that the protection of traditional lifeways is a priority among tribal people. Older people especially are very concerned about that. They are concerned not only about the ceremonies of the community, but they are concerned about keeping the language. There are lots of programs going on all over the country, just wonderful language programs that are awe-inspiring—people with few resources doing amazing work. I was talking with someone today about the very different ways people describe things in the different languages. Charlie and I were at a family picnic a couple of summers ago and this old tribal man told Charlie in Cherokee, "There is a really angry man coming in the sky and he has long hair like you. He's very angry and is going to create a lot of trouble." That's how he described a tornado. So he got up and left. Charlie and I stayed for a little while longer and then left, passing my sister's house. About four hours later my sister called and said there was a tornado that took down the tree in her yard. I was struck by the way the old man thought and talked about the tornado as an angry man.

One of the things I notice about a lot of ceremonies is that not only do they remind us of how we are supposed to live and how we are supposed to be as human beings, it also teaches us how to respect other

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people and every living thing on the earth...

...When I talk about preserving traditional lifeways, everybody has a different idea about what I am talking about and what I mean. Charlie probably thinks about medicine and the language. Other people think about ceremonies, art and music. For me, one of the most precious things about our traditional ways is that we help one another. Wherever I go—no matter how troubled a community may be—I see people helping each another. I see people having a sense of pride, having a sense of family, and having a sense of community. That doesn't mean we don't have massive problems, but at our core, I always find that enduring value of being a tribe, of being a people who help one another. That's what we should hold on to. Nowhere else in this land now called America is that going on. People are completely isolated from one another. Even nations are becoming isolated from one another. *We* have a sense of community and responsibility for one another.

I don't think we realize how precious that is. To be born an indigenous person is to be born with an *identity*, to be born knowing who you are and knowing where you belong. There are so many in the world that don't have that feeling. For us to be able to know our history through our lives and our ceremonies connects our past, our present, and our future. History is a part of who I am. I am product of history.

Wherever I go, I see very positive, very strong indigenous peoples. But I think that outside of our communities, people spend too much time focusing on our problems and not enough time focusing on our strengths. We know our problems—we live with them everyday. Our strength lies in the fact that despite the fact that the most powerful force in the world once tried to wipe us off the face of the earth and then instituted a set of policies designed to make sure that we no longer existed as cultures and as peoples, we are still here. [Applause] Not only are we still here but we are still vibrant. We would not be here now doing what we are doing as tribal peoples if we had not kept our traditional values and our traditional lifeways alive. We are tenacious people. We don't give up. We don't ever give up.

I am optimistic. We are a forward-thinking people. I think we have to be. We all know what happened to us, but what good does it do to be angry and bitter? It doesn't solve anything. How does continuing to acknowledge all of the wrongs all of the time help us? The only people that really are going to get us out of the situation that we find ourselves in now—whatever that may be—is us. Our own thinking, our own doing, our traditional values, our own initiative. [Applause]...That's where the solutions lie.

The Mohawk has had all kinds of terrible things happen to them through history. Yet they never give up. They get knocked down and they stand up. They get knocked down again and stand up again. They don't spend a lot of time being angry about the past. They acknowledge it, but they have a saying, which is one of my favorite sayings: "It's hard to see the future with tears in your eyes." That is my advice to you: Acknowledge your history, but then wipe your eyes so that you can see the future. The future is what we should be concentrating on. [Applause]

Question: What advice would you give to the young people in the audience who are aspiring leaders?

Mankiller: We learn leadership by doing and there are lots of opportunities to lead. Leaders can jump in and help solve problems. You have to be optimistic, positive, and respectful of your political enemies. You have to get involved.

Question: Have you seen any difference between the leadership styles of male and female tribal leaders and how they gain legitimacy among their members?

Mankiller: I see the most difference between tribal leaders and non-tribal leaders. Tribal leaders are more inclusive and see the larger picture. As far as women leaders go, they build teams more and are more collaborative. They see the larger picture and are more inclusive. Someone asked me once, "What are you doing for economic development?" I replied, "I'm building a Head Start program."

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