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"A sorry saga: Obama signs Native American apology resolution; fails to draw attention to it"

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By Rob Capriccioso

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[Rob Capriccioso is Washington staff reporter for the nation's largest Native American newspaper, Indian Country Today. He's also an enrolled member of the Sault Ste. Marie tribe of Chippewa Indians.]

WASHINGTON - Is an apology that's not said out loud really an apology? What if the person expressing the apology doesn't draw attention to it?

Those are questions that some tribal citizens are asking upon learning that President Barack Obama signed off on the Native American Apology Resolution Dec. 19 as part of a defense appropriations spending bill.

The resolution originated in Congress and had passed the Senate as stand-alone legislation in the fall. The House ended up adding the resolution to their version of the defense bill in conference.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., originally introduced the measure intending "to officially apologize for the past ill-conceived policies by the U.S. government toward the Native peoples of this land and re-affirm our commitment toward healing our nation's wounds and working toward establishing better relationships rooted in reconciliation." His bill passed the Senate in 2008 and 2009.

The version signed by Obama became watered down, not making a direct apology from the government, but rather apologizing "on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native peoples by citizens of the United States."

The resolution also includes a disclaimer: Nothing in it authorizes or supports any legal claims against the United States, and the resolution does not settle any claims.

Even with the more general language, the apology is historic, but the White House has made no announcements to date about it. Nor has Obama expressed an apology to

any tribes or Indian citizens, despite saying on the presidential campaign trail that he thought an apology was warranted.

At the White House Tribal Nations Conference on Nov. 5, Obama noted, among other observations, that treaties were violated with tribes and injustices had been done against them, but he did not offer an explicit apology.

The resolution Obama signed specifically "urges the President to acknowledge the wrongs of the United States against Indian tribes in the history of the United States in order to bring healing to this land."

So, by signing the document as part of the defense spending bill, **did Obama fulfill the resolution? Or, does he have an obligation to say the apology out loud and to let tribes know he signed the resolution?**

According to White House spokesman Shin Inouye, there are "no updates at this time" on how Obama might proceed.

Inouye also confirmed that a press release was issued by the White House regarding the president's signature of the defense appropriations bill, but not one on the apology resolution - nor did the defense release mention that the apology was part of that legislation.

When other countries have apologized for travesties against their own indigenous populations, their leaders have been more up front than the Obama White House to date.

In June 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave a widely noted speech to parliament and tribal leaders, apologizing to survivors of the country's residential boarding school system. It was well-received by many First Nations individuals, and some said it helped them feel a sense of healing.

Before that, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized in parliament to all aboriginals for laws and policies that "inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss."

Past presidents of the United States have also been willing to offer apologies to harmed groups.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton said during a press conference that the government was sorry for its role in the Tuskegee syphilis experiment on African Americans. And President Ronald Reagan made a formal statement when he signed the Japanese Internment Apology law in 1988, which carried with it financial restitution.

The up-in-the-air quality of the current Native American resolution and the federal government's handling of it is concerning to some Native Americans.

Robert T. Coulter, executive director of the [Indian Law Resource Center](#), said there has

been an "overwhelming silence" regarding the resolution.

"There were no public announcements, there were no press conferences, there was no national attention, much less international," said the Citizen Potawatomi Nation member.

"You might think that something would be announced, that something would be said about it. After all, they're apologizing to Native Americans, and yet, I don't know that people have really heard about it.

"What kind of an apology is it when they don't tell the people they are apologizing to?" For an apology to have any meaning at all, you do have to tell the people you're apologizing to.

"I have had my doubts on whether this is a true or meaningful apology, and this silence seems to speak very loudly on that point."

Still, Coulter said the resolution doesn't have any legal meaning, no matter if Obama and Congress members say it out loud or not.

"The real test is if Congress actually takes action to back up the apology - will it approve the *Cobell* settlement, will the Indian health bill become law?"

Washington state Rep. John McCoy, a citizen of the Tulalip Tribes, said he was happy that Obama signed the apology, but he would like a verbal statement.

"The president has been pretty busy with high priority stuff, but I'd hope that he'll select a time and place to make an announcement. I'm sure many tribes will bring this issue to the forefront with him."

McCoy believes tribal citizens should take the development as a win, and move on in a meaningful way.

Chris Stearns, a Navajo lawyer and former Clinton administration official, believes Obama will call attention to his signing of the resolution at some point, but there are political realities: First, this is a congressional resolution shepherded by Brownback, so Obama might want to let him take the lead; and second, this is an election year, if Obama were to make a big deal out of an apology, it could be painted by opponents as a weakness or political correctness.

No matter the politics of the situation, some tribes aren't waiting for a statement from the president. Some have already inserted their histories into the congressional record, and plan to bring that record, coupled with the resolution, to state and local leaders, using the documents to remind and educate them on tribes' historical presence and sovereign status.

[Bold-faced sections highlighted by Gail]