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Houska: Taking From Indians Is a Time-Honored American Tradition

“Just what is the state of Indian Affairs in this country?” asked Thom Hartmann. Behind us, images of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, recently dispossessed of their sacred lands, flashed across the monitors. Indian child welfare, weakened jurisdiction, underfunded services mandated by treaty, check-the-box consultation, institutional racism, and a myriad of other issues came to mind. Where to start?

Hartmann’s question came on the heels of Congress passing the ‘Apache Land Grab’, a piece of legislation taking 2,400 acres out of federal protection and placing it into the hands of an Australian mining company called Rio Tinto. Fought against for nearly a decade in Congress, the Resolution Copper ‘land exchange’ was attached as a rider to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on December 2, in the final days of the 113th Congress.

Despite White House opposition to the Resolution Copper provisions, a veto of the bill would have shut down part of the federal government. The NDAA was signed into law on December 19, and the Apache people are now waging an all-out battle against their sacred ceremonial and burial site being turned into a copper mine. At the end of 2014, the United States elected to continue its time-honored tradition of dispossessing Native peoples of their lands.



Enter the Keystone XL bill. The bill will approve a pipeline that will send tar sands oil through traditional tribal lands and the Mni Wiconi Rural Water Project, which provides the drinking water of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, and Lower Brule Sioux Tribe. The irony of the federal government spending nearly half a billion dollars on the still incomplete Mni Wiconi Project to provide reservations with clean drinking water but now voting to place a tar sands pipeline through the Project's watershed is not lost.

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Passed by the Senate on January 29, the House plans to have the Keystone XL bill on Obama's desk this week, where the President has repeatedly stated he will veto it. In the wake of the Environmental Protection Agency submitting comments to the State Department blasting the market analysis and lack of fully explored alternatives to Keystone XL, approval via presidential permit appears less likely by the day.

Meanwhile, Congress has begun looking at attaching the Keystone XL project as a rider to must-pass legislation. President Obama could again be faced with the decision to shut down part of the government or sign the bill into law.

Although numerous tribes directly impacted by the Keystone XL bill have adamantly opposed its approval, the congressional majority has remained steadfast in its support of the project. Senator Ben Cardin's attempt to require express approval and consultation of impacted tribes, including the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, was cut short when the Senate invoked cloture to end debate on Keystone XL.

So just what is the state of Indian affairs today? Congress is again poised to significantly and negatively impact tribal lands via must-pass legislation. The Oceti Sakowin are unified against taking tribal lands that were never ceded to the United States, against a project that will bring increased violence, potential environmental destruction, and many other harms to their communities.

Although the decision to attach Keystone XL to must-pass legislation likely won't be made behind closed doors as it was with the Apache Land Grab, the end result will be the same: tribal people dispossessed of tribal lands to benefit extractive industries.

At a minimum, Indian Country needs to strengthen ties with congressional leadership. Relying upon the agencies, committees, and members dedicated to 'Indian issues' is not

enough. Numerous tribes opposed the taking of Oak Flat, that land is now held by a foreign copper mining operation. Numerous tribes are opposed to Keystone XL, yet it appears Congress will do everything in its power to assist a foreign tar sands operation with prevailing.

Tell Congress we will not stand for further dispossession of tribal lands. We are the original peoples of Turtle Island, the foundation upon which America was built. These are our sacred sites, our waters, our treaty territories; they are not for the taking.

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