What Native American political systems can teach us about power and truth telling

My Choctaw ancestors understood the cost of lies.

by Steven Charleston in the December 30, 2020 issue

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Chief Gary Batton is sworn in to office by Chief Justice Michael Burrage. (Photo courtesy of Deidre Elrod, Choctaw Nation)

When my father was born, he was not an American citizen. He was a Native American, the descendant of a people who had lived on this land for thousands of years. But until June 2, 1924, when the federal government bestowed citizenship on Native Americans, he was politically disenfranchised. He could not vote. He could not hold office. He could not help to determine his own future in his own homeland.

Many people are surprised to learn how late it was in America's history when Indigenous people were finally able to exercise any political rights. The truth of America's colonial past is that both Native Americans and enslaved Africans were denied access to political freedom. Their fates were determined by others behind closed political doors. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920. Enslaved men received the right to vote only after the Civil War, and even then, that right was harshly limited until after 1965. Native Americans had to wait until 1924, when it

was assumed that they would soon become extinct, before they could go to the polls.

This historical fact, as unjust and unsettling as it is, has been largely hidden from the political consciousness of most Americans. It is an embarrassing truth for the land of the free and the home of the brave, so it is left out of the national story. Like many inconvenient truths, it is swept under the carpet of history. To see it clearly, it is necessary to examine the true relationship between political systems and the truths they seek to either embody or obscure.

Politics is not an end in itself but a means to an end—a social tool people depend on to help them fulfill their hopes. Like religion, the purpose of governmental systems is to provide a better community. To do that, we rely on the women and men we elect to government offices to put the welfare of the people first and to do the right thing. When that fundamental expectation is disappointed—when the people we elect do not serve the community's best interest—we begin to lose confidence. We may even start to doubt the legitimacy of the system itself.

This is a grave situation, and it is one many of us feel we are experiencing right now. A gridlocked legislative system, leaders who obey voices other than those of the people they are supposed to serve, endless maneuvering for the sake of power rather than people—this breakdown in our confidence seems justified. It may also seem almost impossible to resolve. Doubt is like water. It can creep into any opening; find any channel, no matter how small; and slowly erode any foundation, no matter how strong it may seem.

Breaking through doubt requires seeing clearly. Realizing, for example, that the United States withheld citizenship from its original inhabitants for so long—in a conscious effort to despoil them by denying them the right to vote or hold office—is painful for those of us who believe in justice. But it is a necessary pain, because it helps us confront the difference between history as truth and history as myth.

In the electoral system of my ancestors, voting day required a lot of cooking.

Like religious systems, political systems arise from a historical narrative, a national story, and the memory of the people. This may be the memory of an exodus or the memory of crossing the Delaware River—either way, the collective history of a community is both its archetype and its ideal. Political systems are who we think we want to be. They are wrapped up in our myths and our history. They are infused with

our sense of identity. They are designed to turn what we hope for into reality.

For this reason, political systems are fundamentally pragmatic. They have a job to do, translating dreams to fact. The agents we choose to put in charge of this machinery take on the mantle of the people, embodying our trust while they represent our needs.

In the electoral system my ancestors were part of, voting day required a lot of cooking. Even before people began to arrive at the election grounds, the cooking fires would already be burning. Great pots of stew would be simmering while men tended the fire, children shucked piles of sweet corn, and women made mounds of fresh bread.

When the time came for speeches, all those who wanted to be leaders knew not to be long-winded. They knew the people would be getting hungry as they smelled the cooking from the outdoor kitchens. The vote would be taken: a show of hands by all present. Then winners and losers would sit down to share a meal, while all around them their children played together.

Just as my ancestors used dance as a communal principle to express religious identity, they used meals to express political identity. Government business was conducted in the midst of a feast. My ancestors understood that the relationship between politics and bread is universal and direct. The whole point is to provide for the people.

Native American leaders were selected for their skills in dealing with the real problems of the people. They were known to the people because they literally broke bread with them. They lived not in the context of power but of community. They were not set apart or pampered. They were specialists in certain areas, entrusted with coping with a particular problem until it was resolved. Then they returned to their lives within the community without fanfare or recompense.

Native American leaders were, in the traditional sense, engineers. If they could convince people they had a bright idea for fixing a problem or dealing with a need, then people would entrust them to do that for as long as it took—but leaders knew their positions would be temporary. Once the job was done, they would return to the collective, the extended family of the nation.

This time limit was critical for a spiritual reason: my ancestors understood that in the jungle of politics, the only natural predator of truth is power. Governmental continuity was provided not by career politicians but by the elders. The collective wisdom of people who had lived through many challenging experiences was valued over the rhetoric of those who may not have had such experiences. Like traditional spiritual leaders, political leaders could not be picked out from the crowd by how they dressed or by how they were treated. They did not live in special places. They did not receive special perks. They did not have special privileges.

Native American cultures know that without truth telling, society won't work.

In fact, taking on roles of leadership usually meant giving away everything they owned. When I was ordained as an Episcopal priest many years ago on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, part of the ceremony was a giveaway. Unlike the European tradition of ordination, in which an individual expects to receive gifts, as a Native person I was expected to give gifts on my honoring day. The sign of my leadership was not how much I could get but how much I could give. If I wanted to have the role of a leader—if that is what I believed I was called to do—then I had to be prepared to make sacrifices for the people. The giveaway reminded me of that principle.

Imagine a society in which there were no expensive political campaigns. No political parties. No special interest groups. No lobbies. No career politicians. Instead, those who thought they had skills to help with the community's most pressing needs would be invited to explain exactly what they planned to do. If they could convince enough of the community, then they would be empowered to do that, but without any expectation that they might be asked to do it again. Tenure would always be job-specific.

In addition, because their service was a sacrificial one, leaders would be elected to make a giveaway, which means they would not enrich themselves in any way. In Native American communities, the most revered person was often one who had few personal possessions. Their stature was affirmed by how much they had been able to give to the people, not by how much they had been able to take.

The traditional Native American political system I am describing has a resonance with the democratic process we already uphold, but with a stronger emphasis on the ethical and spiritual nature of political leadership. In fact, the fulcrum on which all political leadership was balanced can be summarized in a single word: *truth*.

Native American culture had two characteristics that early European settlers often recognized and recorded: Native people were not afraid of death, and they always told the truth. Those were stereotypes, of course, but they were grounded in reality. The lack of fear about death arose from a strong spiritual connection to the ancestors, a deep trust in the love of the spirit, and a sense of inner peace cultivated over a lifetime of daily spiritual practice. The importance of truth arose from a simple but profound understanding of what constitutes a civilization: no human system will endure unless it is built on truth.

Traditional Native American culture was not much concerned with religious truth claims, in a dogmatic sense. It was concerned with telling the truth on a personal level. The social contract formed by centuries of Native American civilization made telling the truth a core expectation for all human interactions. Speaking the truth was the highest virtue. Failure to do so was so egregious that it demanded the ultimate penalty in the political and judicial systems of our people—no, not death, but exile.

This degree of insistence upon truth telling arises in our Native American cultures because we understand that without it, none of the community systems on which we depend will work. Truth telling is the one essential ingredient in all of them. It is the prerequisite for any stable society.

Today, from Native America’s vantage point, the tolerance of lies is the source of our US dilemma. Once a culture allows truth to become relative or even meaningless, then that culture is in trouble. This is especially apparent in our political, judicial, and educational systems. Politics becomes the art of skillful lying. Education becomes the practice of telling ourselves what we want to hear. Justice becomes an exercise in power and privilege, not truth.

The choice between truth and lies affects all social systems on which we depend, but it is most apparent in the political sphere. If people cannot believe their leaders are telling them the truth, then the whole structure of governance collapses.

The Native American insistence on truth as a nonnegotiable for all social interactions is not a stereotype of the noble savage, perpetuated by Western colonialism. It’s a warning flag from a civilization that witnessed firsthand the cost of lies. The treaties made with our people were lies. The promises made to us were lies. The stories told about us were lies. The motives for taking our land were lies. The reasons for

destroying our culture were lies.

Few societies are as familiar with the full impact of lies as Native America. We are very experienced with the outcome of institutionalized lying. Therefore, this much we know for certain: systems that do not depend on the truth become corrupt, self-destructive, and eventually lethal.

Climate change is a good example. Denial of the truth that human activity and choices are eroding the greatest system of all—Mother Earth—is already killing life on this planet on a huge scale. If the deception and misinformation continue, ecological breakdown will eventually reach a tipping point, a point of no return. This is not some romantic Native American prophecy told by an exotic shaman about events in the far future. This is contemporary truth told by a people who know the cost of lies.

Because our many social systems are interconnected, the lies told in the political arena impact the judicial system, reappear in the educational system, and infect the health-care system. Permission to lie is cancer in the body of any social organism. The more visible that permission becomes, the more acceptable it becomes in all spheres of life. Over time, it eats away at the entire structure of a civilization. It consumes hope in a darkness that cannot be penetrated by any light of truth.

Telling the truth was not easy for my ancestors, and it is not easy for us today. It requires a social contract that is based on a spiritual commitment to something bigger than ourselves. It means taking the idea of community to the level of kinship, a bond of trust that cannot be broken. It means saying what we mean and being honest in what we do. It means practicing what we preach. It means having zero tolerance for lying in every aspect of our culture.

This may seem like a fantasy to those of us who have lost confidence in our social institutions. But it is good to remember that it has been done before. The proof that a political system can exist based on truth telling is there for all of us to see. All we have to do is look behind the lies told in our own history to see the truth of Native American civilization. For centuries, we developed an ethic of truth. We inculcated that value throughout our society. It manifested in how we taught our young, cared for our sick, elected our leaders. Truth telling was the cornerstone.

Honesty, like hope, can become a focal point for our community’s regeneration if we work on it together. Simply insisting on the truth is a first point of contact for us to

begin building a new civilization. The truth about climate change would be a good place to start, but there are endless other places where the light we shine into darkness is the truth we need to hear and speak with one another.

Shining this light requires a unique sort of vision. My ancestors believed that long ago the maker of all things gave each tribe of creation a special gift. To the bears went strength. To the eagles, wisdom. To the deer, grace and beauty. The human beings had none of these gifts, for they were not as strong, wise, or beautiful as other animals. But they were given one thing that was special to them: vision, the ability to see both what is now and what is coming to be.

Sacred vision is our holy inheritance. We won't be saved by how strong we are, nor how wise we are, nor how beautiful we are—only by what we can see through the eyes of the Spirit, for what we see is what we will become.

This article is adapted with permission from Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage, *out soon from Broadleaf Books. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The cost of lies."*