

American Indian Spiritual Walk to President Reagan's Ranch

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1988: Chumash History

On August 20, 1988 members of the Coastal Band of the Chumash joined other indigenous people in a Spiritual Walk whose purpose was to focus attention on the policies of the Reagan administration towards native Americans.

President Reagan lived on a 688-acre estate located in the foothills above the Chumash archaeological site of Kasil. Title to the coastal lands of Kasil is now claimed by the Refugio State Park. The resort town of Santa Barbara is located a short distance east of Kasil canyon. At this date, the federal government continued to deny the local Chumash legal recognition, and no reservation lands had been set aside for the descendants of the coastal Chumash.

President Reagan had recently offended many Native Americans during a summit meeting in Moscow, Russia [May 1988]. Excusing the federal governments seizure of indigenous peoples land, Reagan said: "Maybe we should not have humored them in wanting to stay in that kind of primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said, 'No, come join us. Be citizens along with the rest of us.'"(The Sun, August 21, 1988, page A7).

Native leaders across the continent were appalled at the insensitivity of these remarks, and many said so publicly. Newspapers and television coverage brought the public's attention to "primitive lifestyles" commentary and the apparent ignorance of the President to the fact that Native Americans were already citizens. The decision was made to hold a prayer vigil, as a positive effort to open a dialogue with the President. White House spokesman M. Fitzwater telephoned Mike Zarate [Khus], a historian for the Coastal Band, on the 18th. He offered to arrange a meeting in Washington between the native groups active in the spiritual walk and the President. 19th. Zarate met with

Fitzwater and the deputy White House chief of staff, to arrange a meeting for September. But the walk was not called off.

For security reasons the number of walkers was limited to twenty. They climbed from the coast upward for seven miles into the coastal mountains until they came to the gate of the President's ranch. Reagan did not appear at the gate to speak to them, and no one on his staff offered entry onto the ranch. The blocked walkers offered prayers for peace at the gate, and returned peacefully to the Kasil coast.

[John Anderson, June 4, 2002]

In my research files, I found a flyer distributed by the American Indian Action Group, which sponsored the spiritual walk. This pan-tribal organization was located in the nearby town of Goleta. It was remarkably successful in coordinating this nationally televised event which brought the local Chumash and other native groups from across the continent together in a peaceful and constructive expression of Native American spirituality.

[John Anderson, June 8, 2002]

August 20 Flyer

Purpose of the Walk "The purpose of the walk is to offer prayers for world peace and understanding."

Native speakers Speakers addressed the crowd gathered on the Kasil coast [Refugio State Park] between 9-11 a.m. prior to the spiritual walk. They included John Sespe [Chumash spiritual leader], Sid Flores [Coastal Band of the Chumash nation], Clarence Atwell [Tachi tribe of Yokuts], Jan Goslin [Potawatomi/Kansas Kicapoo] from the American Association on Indian Affairs, Anne Medicine [Iroquois], Dr. Larry Ramirez [Apache], Tony Romero [Santa Ynez Chumash reservation], William Rosse [western Shoshone], and Danny Zapata [Hopi].

The American Indian Action Group "The American Indian Action Group is an inter-tribal organization formed to satisfy the peoples' need to express their opinions regarding the president's remarks and to present Mr. Reagan and the public with a realistic view of American Indians." [A questionnaire was distributed at the rally, soliciting "comments, concerns, and complaints" that would be presented to the President and his rival presidential candidates. "Confidentiality of all respondents will be preserved."

Show Respect for Mother Earth "No drugs, no alcohol, no weapons. Indian security is on hand and wearing red armbands. Please follow their instructions. No placards on sticks. Obey State Park rules. Show respect for Mother Earth."

The Gaviota Coastal Study of 2002 And the Reagan Factor

The Reagan family sold the ranch, which used to be known as the Western White House. They

unfortunately never developed a special relationship with the Chumash people, as far as I can determine.

The Reagans could still do much to influence the federal government as it considers future land use of this area of the California coast, including the issues of federal recognition and a land base for the Barbareno [Tsmuwich] Chumash.

Both the Coastal Band and the Barbareno Council have formally asked the federal government to set aside land for them on this coast. The government has not released its planning options to the public. It is expected that one option will be the creation of a National Seashore along 76 miles of the coast west of Santa Barbara. Presumably, one or more of the options proposed by the federals will include a land base for the Chumash.

Will the Reagans be a factor in the feasibility study? Will they reach out to the Chumash, some fourteen years after the Spiritual Walk?

Answers to these questions are hard to determine at this date. Reagan's presidency was not known for sympathy for Native Americans. In 1981 his administration imposed draconian budget cuts of forty percent for social programs serving native populations. In 1984 Reagan's Commission On Indian Reservation Economics began a systematic attack against communal ownership on native reservations, seeking to promote individual profit and private ownership on the reservations.

Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, made a reputation as an anti-native and anti-environmental government official who promoted the interests of private enterprise. The current Republican President, George Bush, has appointed an Interior Secretary who worked closely with the controversial Watt administration, so Reagan's influence continues to be felt today. Dorreen Yellow Bird, a reporter at the Grand Forks Herald [North Dakota newspaper] wrote a June 10, 2002 article on the politics of new Secretary. It is called "Interior Nominee Gale Norton Raises Concerns of Native Americans."

The Reagan Ranch continues to be a center of conservative influence even in 2002. You can read about its programs at www.reaganranch.org This is a web site maintained by Young America's Foundation, a very conservative organization which describes Reagan as the greatest president of the twentieth century. The YAF maintains an office on State Street in Santa Barbara and describes itself as "the principal outreach organization of the Conservative Movement."

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library is also located on traditional Chumash land, located in the mountains of the Simi Valley. Simi was a Chumash town.

This web page presents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or in a group.