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Remarks by the President at Bill Signing For The Claims Resolution Act

South Court Auditorium

5:34 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Hello, everybody. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Welcome, everybody. We are thrilled to have you here. And I want to start by acknowledging a few people who have worked so hard to allow us to be here today on this wonderful occasion.

Our Attorney General, Eric Holder -- you can give him a round of applause. Two outstanding members of my Cabinet who couldn't have worked harder to make today happen -- Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. (Applause.) And four outstanding leaders who made it their business to see this thing through -- Senator Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana; Senator Jeff Bingaman, Democrat of New Mexico; Representative Jim Clyburn, Democrat of South Carolina; and Representative Tom Cole, Republican of Oklahoma. Please give them a big round of applause. (Applause.)

And one last person who doesn't get a lot of notice but put a huge amount of time and actually crossed the T's and dotted the I's to help this thing along -- my good friend from law school -- even though he now looks younger than me because I've gotten the gray hair and he hasn't -- (laughter) -- and what's the official title? Is it deputy or -- it's associate -- Associate Attorney General Tom Perrelli. (Applause.)

Obviously, despite the extraordinary leadership on the stage, this also would not have gotten done without the activists, the tribal leaders, and the outstanding members of Congress -- both Democrat and Republican -- who have come together and done so much over the years to make this a reality.

Here in America, we believe that all of us are equal and that each of us deserves the chance to pursue our own version of happiness. It's what led us to become a nation. It's at the heart of who we are as a people. And our history is defined by the struggle to fulfill this ideal -- to build a more perfect union, to ensure that all of us, regardless of our race or religion, our color or our creed, are afforded the same rights as Americans, and the fair and equal treatment under the law.

I think all of us understand that we haven't always lived up to those ideals. When we've fallen short, it's been up to ordinary citizens to stand up to inequality and unfairness wherever they find it. That's how we've made progress. That's how we've moved forward. And that's why we are here today -- to sign a bill into law that closes a long and unfortunate chapter in our history.

First, for many years African American farmers claimed they were discriminated against when they applied for federal farm loans -- making it more difficult for them to stay in business and maintain their farms. In 1999, a process was established to settle these claims. But the settlement was implemented poorly and tens of thousands of African American families who filed paperwork after the deadline were denied their chance to make their case.

And that's why, as senator, I introduced legislation to provide these farmers the right to have their claims heard. That's why I'm proud that Democrats and Republicans have come together to lay this case to rest. And that's why I'm proud that Secretary Vilsack and everybody at the Department of Agriculture are continuing to address claims of past discrimination by other farmers throughout our country.

The second case we're addressing today has to do with the responsibilities that the government has to Native

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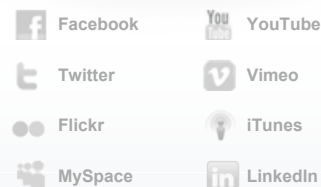
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Americans. It began when Elouise Cobell -- who's here today -- charged the Interior Department with failing to account for tens of billions of dollars that they were supposed to collect on behalf of more than 300,000 of her fellow Native Americans.

Elouise's argument was simple: The government, as a trustee of Indian funds, should be able to account for how it handles that money. And now, after 14 years of litigation, it's finally time to address the way that Native Americans were treated by their government. It's finally time to make things right.

The bipartisan agreement finalized this month will result in payments to those affected by this case. It creates a scholarship fund to help make higher education a reality for more Native Americans. It helps put more land in the hands of tribes to manage for their members. And it also includes money to settle lawsuits over water rights, giving seven tribes in Arizona, Montana and New Mexico permanent access to secure water supplies year-round.

After years of delay, this bill will provide a small measure of justice to Native Americans whose funds were held in trust by a government charged with looking out for them. And it represents a major step forward in my administration's efforts to fulfill our responsibilities and strengthen our government-to-government relationship with the tribal nations.

In the end, the work that is represented on this stage and among these members of Congress, this isn't simply a matter of making amends. It's about reaffirming our values on which this nation was founded -- principles of fairness and equality and opportunity. It's about helping families who suffered through no fault of their own get back on their feet. It's about restoring a sense of trust between the American people and the government that plays such an important role in their lives.

As long as I have the privilege of serving as your President I will continue to do everything I can to restore that trust. And that's why I am so extraordinarily proud to sign this bill today.

I want to thank once again all those members of Congress. We got a lot of members here -- the Congressional Black Caucus, who I know worked the Pigford issue tirelessly. We've got, as I said, Democrats and Republicans who were supportive of this issue for so long. This is one of those issues where you don't always get political credit, but it's just the right thing to do. And I couldn't be prouder of you.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

(The bill is signed.) (Applause.)

END
5:40 P.M. EST

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