

# Indian Country and Obama's Choice for Secretary of the Interior

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In March, Ken Salazar will leave his well-appointed office at the helm of the Department of the Interior and return to Colorado, which he represented in the Senate until his 2009 nomination and unanimous confirmation as Secretary.

Secretary Salazar's tenure was widely regarded as level-headed but not revolutionary. He was criticized by conservatives for his bold six-month moratorium on offshore drilling after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, and he reorganized the ineffective and ethically bankrupt Minerals Management Service. He established a good track record with Indian tribes. Milestones for his tenure include the settlement of the \$2.5 billion Cobell lawsuit and other Indian trust suits based on BIA's mishandling of property belonging to Native Americans and Indian tribes, as well as initiatives guaranteeing access to water for Indian tribes and reforming Indian land leasing regulations.

Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire's name is being passed around as a positive choice for Indian Country. Gregoire has made positive changes for tribes in the state, including returning limited civil and criminal jurisdiction to Washington's Indian tribal courts. Washington tribes supported her campaign, and her staff in Olympia has great experience in Indian Country. Gregoire has advocated for Indian gaming and resisted efforts to extract onerous revenue-sharing provisions in gaming compact negotiations. These relationships have earned her the support of Indian Country for the nomination. Gregoire's appointment would also blunt criticism of a lack of gender and racial diversity in Obama's cabinet. However, Gregoire is also a natural fit to run the Environmental Protection Agency in Obama's second term, so she may be otherwise occupied.

Indian Country also supports Raul Grijalva, who has served as a democratic U.S. Representative from Arizona since 2002. Grijalva serves on the House Committee on Natural Resources and the Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs. Grijalva has been a strong advocate for increased consultation with Indian tribes by the federal government before undertaking major actions that affect tribes and Indian land. He is friendly to Indian gaming and strongly opposed federal legislation intended to restrict off-reservation Indian gaming in Phoenix.

Tom Udall, Democratic Senator from New Mexico, seems a natural choice. His father, Stewart Udall, served as Interior Secretary under both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 to 1969 and was widely hailed as an environmentalist and an advocate for justice for Navajo Indians poisoned by

uranium tailings. Tom Udall is a friend to Indians and is committed to water rights, public safety in Indian Country, and improving the Indian Health Service. However, Udall has said he is not interested, and politics is a factor as New Mexico Governor Martinez would certainly fill his U.S. Senate seat with a Republican.

Former Senator Byron Dorgan from North Dakota is denying rumors that he may be a candidate for the job. Dorgan served in the Senate for 30 years and as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs from 2007-2011, an excellent pedigree for a move to Interior. He was instrumental in sponsoring the Tribal Law and Order Act and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act in 2010. Dorgan supports Indian gaming and has been honored by the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA), the leading Indian gaming policy group.

Any of these choices would continue the pro-Indian direction that has characterized the Obama administration and the Department of the Interior, avoiding disruption in the economic development priorities of Indian Country, key to which are gaming and energy development.

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