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Expelling Freedmen within Cherokees' rights

As citizens of the United States, we relish news of countries around the world conducting elections. We, the United States and its citizens, do everything we can to ensure elections free from violence and free from outside interference. We claim it's democracy at work. We want the entire world to have democracy.

But when it comes to democracy within the United States, we don't always take the high road. We have a history of trying to keep people from voting by a variety of ways: residency requirements, wrong gender, redistricting, poll taxes, education -- anything and everything, including violence, to keep people from voting.



By Tom Beaver,
The View From Beaver Lodge

It's a sad history of voting in the United States. Those efforts continue today in the Dakotas and other states. But those efforts are directed at Native Americans. It seems when Indian people exert their democracy, the United States and its citizens, feel compelled to complain about Indians taking control. The interferences are detrimental to individual Indian people voting in tribal elections and for their tribal governments. The interference goes all the way to forcing foreign systems of governance on Indian people and their political systems.

I support the right of tribal governments and their citizens to be free of interference on matters affecting their internal business and governmental decisions. Tribes, for too long, have had outside influences determining internal matters. I support tribal sovereignty.

Recently, the Cherokee Nation, headquartered in Tahlequah, Okla., conducted a constitutional election. Normally, such a vote would not have been of interest to most people and would not have generated any interest in such a highly-localized Cherokee national issue. The question revolved about the issue of Cherokee Freedmen. The Freedmen are former slaves.

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Do the Freedmen have any Cherokee blood in their families? Are the Freedmen Cherokee? Are the Freedmen Cherokee citizens because a foreign government claimed they were Cherokee and forced the Cherokee Nation to sign a treaty claiming they were citizens?

The Cherokee citizens voted to determine the membership of their nation. This is a basic right of all sovereign nations -- to determine who are or are not its citizens. By their vote, you now must have Cherokee blood in your veins. You must also be able to prove your citizenship. The proof comes from a 1906 roll of Cherokee citizens developed by the United States government. The roll includes black and white Cherokee citizens along with other Cherokees of mixed blood ancestry.

The Freedmen now claim the vote was wrong and they've called in just about everyone under the sun to protest the vote. The Cherokee Nation will be facing some strong opponents because of the vote of the Cherokee citizens.

An all out assault on tribal sovereignty will soon take place over the vote. The Congressional Black Caucus is already seeking to interfere with the legal election of a sovereign nation. They have already sent a letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They question the "validity, legality, as well as the morality" of the vote. The black members of the Congress will attack all tribal governments and their sovereignty and will seek to end all money going for Indian people. Now, how moral are they to interfere in an election by a sovereign country and to seek an end for tribal sovereignty?

A black Oklahoma lawmaker is already making noise about problems for the Cherokee Nation. Rep. Mike Shelton, D-Oklahoma City, told the Muskogee Phoenix newspaper, "For years, those of us in Oklahoma government have stood with Native American tribes to protect their sovereignty under treaties with the federal government. But given Cherokee Nation members' recent decision to ignore provisions of their own treaty, I wonder how long the rest of us can be expected to defend it."

The sad thing about all of this is how easily each learned the master's distrust and hate for each other.

Tom Beaver is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. He writes about issues facing Kansas. E-mail him at tom.beaver@sbcglobal.net.

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