

Vote purposed to build a great Indian nation, knit together by one thread

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In a special election on March 3, 77 percent of Cherokee voters agreed that the Cherokee Nation is an Indian nation, united by blood to Indian ancestors listed on the base roll of our people. The Cherokee Nation sincerely regrets any misunderstandings that have occurred following the vote.

As deputy principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, I would like to clarify the meaning of the vote, and the true nature of the Cherokee people.

An Inclusive People

The Cherokee Nation is well known to be among the most inclusive of Indian tribes. Here in northeastern Oklahoma, all we have to do is open our eyes and look around to see that Cherokees are of all races, black, white, Latino, Asian and more. Our churches, schools and communities reflect that it does not matter what you look like. If you have one Indian ancestor on the base roll, you are a member of the Cherokee family.

Six thousand Indians went to Oklahoma City recently to watch the Sequoyah Schools girls' basketball team win a state championship and the boys' basketball team win second. Both teams have players who look Indian, white and black.

But it didn't matter what their race was. Every player was Indian as far as their fans were concerned. The March 3 vote helped to clarify the people's passionate belief that we are a distinctively Indian nation because regardless of our other ethnic heritages, we share a blood tie to Indian ancestors on the base roll.

Who May Decide?

In addition to answering the question, "Who is a Cherokee," the March 3 vote raised the crucial issue of "Who gets to decide?"

The same tribal court which held that our 1975 Constitution was not clear enough in defining eligibility for citizenship further held that resolving the question was a right reserved for Cherokee voters.

Some have suggested — incorrectly — that citizenship in the Cherokee Nation was decided by the Treaty of 1866. Cherokees honored this treaty by giving former slaves and other non-Indians in our region the same rights as the Cherokees to benefits that included land and cash. But the more important point is that citizenship in a sovereign nation is not decided by a treaty with another government. The Cherokee Nation re-asserted sovereignty by adopting a new Constitution in 1975.

Cherokees treasure our democratic freedoms and we paid dearly for them. Our Constitution grants us the right to vote and to determine for ourselves who is a Cherokee. The U.S. government through its courts has also held time and again that Indian tribes have the right to determine their own citizenship. The people have made a decision shared by virtually every other Indian tribe in America, based on a right to self-determination that virtually every tribe holds absolute.

Family values

It's important to note in this discussion that the Cherokee Nation deplores racism in all its forms, and we are deeply saddened by the misrepresentations we have seen of our policy and history. We ourselves have suffered bitterly from racism. Nearly one-fourth of our nation died in the forced march west known as the Trail of Tears. Genocide against Indian tribes, like the enslavement of Africans, is a tragic chapter in America's racial history.

Today, Cherokees are focused on building a future that respects all people. The sole purpose of this vote was to weave together a great Indian nation, made up of many ethnic groups which are knit together through one common cultural thread — a shared bond to an Indian ancestor on the base roll. Because of our Indian blood we are bound together forever.

Joe Grayson Jr. is deputy principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.