

Freedmen row is not about racism but sovereignty

Citizen-Times.com

09/06/2007

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published September 6, 2007 12:15 am

It's safe to say that my fellow Cherokees in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma have a mess on their hands. A referendum to remove membership from descendants of the Freedmen, freed slaves once owned by members of the Cherokee Nation, passed. The result was frequent accusations of racism, along with some misrepresentation in the mainstream media and a proposal from one member of Congress to dissolve the federal relationship.

The vote was one of ensuring an Indian ancestor on the base roll. Being black or any other race doesn't matter as long as that ancestor is there, but where it gets messy is that these descendants were given citizenship through a treaty. While forced, it's still a legal document. The Cherokee Nation also successfully fought to revoke recognition of the Delaware, making them subject to the Cherokee Nation, which throws out any Cherokee ancestry argument.

The Cherokee Nation has every right to determine its own citizenship criteria, a cornerstone of sovereignty. U.S. Indian policy stands to return to what it was in the 1950s when the U.S. was trying to wipe out self-governance.

That's the effect that will be achieved through legislation proposed by Rep. Diane Watson, D-Calif., to cut all federal funding and sever the federal relationship with the Cherokee Nation unless the Freedmen's citizenship is restored. "The Cherokee Nation's leadership claims that it has the sovereign right to determine who is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. But the sovereign right to discriminate is no right at all," she said.

Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-N.C., is one of the cosponsors, and Watson praised a move by another N.C. Representative, Mel Watt, to cut funding for the Cherokee Nation through a vote in the House Committee on Financial Services.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, while staying out of the Cherokee Nation controversy, could just as well find itself in the same shoes over its politically incorrect position opposing Lumbee recognition. Watson's bill is an attack on tribal sovereignty that seeks to return to the termination era, and that's why the move and controversy is such a major concern in all of Indian Country. If this bill comes before Rep. Heath Shuler, he should put sovereignty ahead of ill-informed emotions and vote against it.

Joe Martin has been editor of the Cherokee One Feather since 1996. He won third place for Individual Best Editorial Writing at the 2004 Native Media Awards from the Native American Journalists Association at the 2004 UNITY Journalists of Color convention in Washington. He lives on tribal trust lands in the Cherokee County community.