

Trump's Pipeline Orders Challenge Protesters

Ignoring environmental concerns and tribal objections, President Trump has put the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines back on track without even consulting the opponents, Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

On his second business day in office, President Donald Trump signed executive actions to restart construction of the controversial Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, sending shockwaves through the indigenous environmental communities at Standing Rock and their supporters across the U.S. and around the world.

After Trump's actions, I spoke with Tom Goldtooth, Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, who has worked on various grassroots environmental issues with tribal governments to develop indigenous-based environmental protection infrastructures. He was a key organizer at the Standing Rock protests that convinced President Obama to consider alternative pipeline routes.

Dennis Bernstein: Give us your initial response, your overview.

Tom Goldtooth: Yes, our network, which is a grassroots Native organization of frontline organizations and individuals and tribal members throughout North America, are very concerned. We're very alarmed at how fast he has put this ... insane initiative forward.

[...] We definitely are opposed to their recklessness, and the political motivation behind these kinds of fossil fuel development projects. As we know, [Trump] is invested in the Dakota Access Pipeline. And this is just a really bad step on his behalf, as a new-seated President of the United States.

He is violating existing, government to government policies between the United States and tribes, as federally recognized tribes. He never consulted... no one in his administration consulted with the chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, nor any of the other federally recognized tribes, on this initiative that he is putting forward.

And so, we're very concerned as he's taken this executive action towards making the first step towards approving of the easement of the Dakota Access Pipeline across the Missouri River. So, you know, we're very concerned. We had a couple

calls with members in the community at Standing Rock. Some people in leadership with the Oceti Sakowin Camp, as well as many of our other supporters. So, we definitely are bringing attention to this ... where's this going to end? [...]

We know that these kinds of pipelines are violating the private rights of private land owners, ranchers and farmers along that corridor, with threats of eminent domain. They were forced. It was a forced choice many of those private land owners were faced with, on these kinds of energy developments. So we're going to see that more under this privatization initiative that Trump has put forward around jobs and economic development. But at what expense?

DB: This is about the most blatant... one of the most blatant things I've seen in my lifetime. But this really does continue, shall we say, Columbus' American tradition of genocide... I mean, this is a white ruler acting on behalf of the white race. Wouldn't you say? It has to be seen that way.

TG: It's a continuation of those colonial policies that are at the foundation of the United States. And throughout past decades under social justice and environmental justice movement initiatives, we begin to try to unwrap these colonial policies built upon racism. And here we are. We got a president in office that is racist and, many people say, is a fascist. And so, this is just another continuing practice that we have to stop. We have to mobilize and stop this right now.

Like I said, this initiative is indicating to us, right now, that he doesn't respect the sovereignty rights of our American Indians and our Alaskan Natives. And this decision he's making, if he moves forward and implements this action with these executive orders, it's going to violate the treaty rights of the Lakota/Dakota people. But where's it going to stop? It's going to violate, again, all of our Native rights. So, we've spoken out against this pipeline and the Black Snake initiative, with all these pipelines. And Trump is portraying his true self, joining forces with that darkness.

There's no light in his decisions. These prairie lands are very rich culturally, and environmentally, and it's a very spiritual relationship our people have with the land. And he's violating that, as well.

DB: It seems that all the actions at Standing Rock were, in a way, preparation for the resistance of this next level of violence. Would you say that the work that people have done will do them well, in terms of the continued resistance? And perhaps people are already thinking about that, in deep ways?

TG: Well, one of the things that many thousands of people ... that have come to Oceti Sakowin Camp and the Sacred Stone Camp, at Standing Rock, have

consistently said... they said, "This is a spiritual movement." They felt that connection to the sacredness of Mother Earth. They saw that our people... both Native and non-Native, were standing in prayer, in peace.

And they saw that there is a meaning when we say "Water is life." And there's meaning when we say we have to recognize the sacredness of our Mother Earth. But, yet, we're dealing with the colonial system of laws and regulations that are often violating those natural laws, as we know it, of protection of that sacredness of Mother Earth, and Father Sky.

So, that's why we [have] definitely been opposed. And many of Trump's comments in his election process, talking about privatization—what that means to us is the privatization of nature, of land, of water. So that it gives those rights to the corporate, private sector. They have more rights than we have.

Those corporations like Dakota Access Pipeline, Energy Transfer Partners, ConocoPhillips, Shell, Exxon, Chevron... they have more standing than our own first Nations, or our Native people. Whether it's in Canada in the Tar Sands, or whether it's right here in the prairie lands with these pipe lines. So, definitely we saw a wake up, as millions of people globally looking at what's going on at Standing Rock. So, we're going to utilize that movement that we're building here.

And we're going to see what Trump is going to do. We're going to demand that he pull back from implementing these executive orders. Otherwise, we're going to put that call out. There's going to be massive mobilization, and civil disobedience, on a scale that may never have been seen on newly seated presidents of the United States. So, we're going to keep this movement going. This resistance is stronger now than ever before. It's not just about Standing Rock. It's not just about this specific pipeline. It's about a whole system that is not sustainable. Something has to change and Trump is not going to be that leader that is going to be looking at the best interests of everyone's future.

DB: Final question, now. The climate denialists obviously own Trump. He's one of them. ... This battle ... is the cutting edge ... [of] those who understand how important it is to protect the Earth and the water ... [against] these fascists who put profits over everything The line really is drawn at these pipelines, isn't it?

TG: It is, it is. It was that dream that that Lakota woman had years ago on this Trans-Canada Keystone XL pipeline... when that dream told her that this pipeline has a darkness to it, that it's a black snake. And that we have to, somehow, cut the head off of that snake. So the question is what do these pipelines

represent? It's like a whole system that's clouding the reality of what we need to do. And now it has the leadership that is put into office.

So that's why our spiritual leaders are telling people that we need to go back to a prayer. We need to go back to having ceremonies, and this is what's going to bring in that light of understanding, of peace and compassion. And maybe that's one reason I got that Gandhi peace award, here, you know, last year.

And, there's a link between how we as modern society and this world have separated itself from that sacredness of Mother Earth. And, we need to, as a humanity, throughout the world, including President Trump, his cabinet, Congress, and state by state, county by county, city by city, and our families, we all need to look at what's going on.

We need to come back to understanding what our relationship is to these natural creative laws, these principles, that many land-based peoples still have, many of our Native peoples still have. And so, it's that critical right now. We know that the current economic system of unlimited growth is barely hanging in there, on a thread. But it's trying to survive. At what expense, though? So it is an indigenous issue, but it's all of people's issue, our future children's issue. So it's that critical.

DB: And that Gandhian prayerful, peaceful resistance, which was really engaging the youth, that's going to continue defining this movement as the resistance grows. You feel sure and certain of that?

TG: Yes, we gotta continue. We've got to continue to put our thoughts together, from our heart. Let's link up and bring together our mind and our heart. Sometimes that's the furthest distance that is created in these modern times. So we gotta let that heart speak up.

Compassion and prayer is very strong. It can move mountains. And so, as our Native spiritual leaders have said in these ceremonies ... we have to stand there in resistance, taking action in peace and prayer. And we will continue to do that at Standing Rock, with the leadership of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, with its elders, and their youth and their women.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
