



The Morning Star Institute

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Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Clemency or Compassionate Release for Leonard Peltier

Dear Mr. President:

It is with deep appreciation for all you have done to uplift Native Peoples that I write to urge that you use your constitutional power to allow Leonard Peltier to live out his remaining years as a free man. Now in his 47th year of incarceration, he has served a longer sentence than most principals in murder convictions, nearly two-thirds of his life thus far. The gross injustice of Mr. Peltier's long incarceration has been recognized by both federal prosecutors who handled his case and the most prominent human rights voices in the world.

Mr. Peltier was imprisoned for aiding and abetting in a case where his co-defendants, facing the same charge of murder, were found not guilty on self-defense grounds. Vine Deloria, Jr., Esq., who was our most esteemed author, historian and scholar advocate, was on the legal team that secured acquittal for the co-defendants. When I was Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians (1984-1989), a position Mr. Deloria held in the 1960s, he provided research in private sessions to Native leaders, strongly urging a full examination of the manner in which the two cases were conducted that resulted in the dramatically different verdicts—not-guilty for the two co-defendants and guilty for Mr. Peltier.

The Morning Star Institute, which Mr. Deloria served as a Founding Board Member and I serve as Founding President (1984-present), sponsored those sessions, along with NCAI's cultural rights agenda. Morning Star, NCAI and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians (of which Mr. Peltier is a citizen) joined the growing call for his freedom, led by American Indian Movement Founder Dennis J. Banks and Reuben A. Snake, Jr., and John Trudell, both of whom served as AIM National Chairman, and Lenny Foster, longtime AIM advocate for religious freedom for Mr. Peltier and all Native inmates.

When Senator Daniel K. Inouye asked Mr. Deloria, Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper Oren Lyons and me to advise on an action agenda as he became Chairman of the Senate (Select and then permanent) Committee on Indian Affairs, we urged him to protect inherent sovereignty in the legal wrangling over tribal gaming operations; to establish the National Museum of the American Indian, to require repatriation of Native Ancestors and cultural patrimony; to protect Native languages, lands, waters, sacred places and religious freedom. We also asked him to work to call attention to the campaigns to free David Sohapp, imprisoned for fishing in his customary treaty places, and to free Leonard Peltier. The Chairman's publicity campaign for Mr. Sohapp gained swift action and the freedom he deserved, but his work to free Mr. Peltier ended with President Bill Clinton's unfulfilled promise.

Mr. President, I have long admired your commitment to fighting injustice and to restorative justice. As I know from our interactions in the mid-to-late 1970s—when I was Legislative Liaison for the Native American Rights Fund and then as a political appointee, Special Assistant for Indian Legislation and Liaison, in the Carter-Mondale Administration—you were a supporter of early versions and enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the Tribally-Controlled Community Colleges Act and other remedial measures that President Jimmy Carter signed into law.

Your advocacy for restoring Native Peoples' collective and individual rights has not wavered—as evidenced in, among others, your support as Vice President of tribal jurisdiction regarding non-Native perpetrators of domestic violence in amendments to what was your Senate-sponsored Violence Against Women Act; and as President by your restoration of the Bears Ears sacred place and return of its tribal co-managers' authorities.

During the Obama-Biden Administration, I was so taken with your kind words to each of us who were Recipients of the 2014 Presidential Medal of Freedom; right before we went on stage, at our moments of greatest self-doubt, you reminded us of our self-worth. And your compassionate buoying up of our longtime friend, the ailing Hon. John Dingell (“Big John! Looking strong! One of my first best friends in Congress!”), was exactly the right thing to say as he was wondering aloud if he was all but forgotten—you gave him the will and confidence to stand to receive his Medal, when our rehearsal had him remaining seated.

Much earlier, when you were new to the Senate and I was a broadcast journalist and arts and cultures director at WBAI-FM in New York City, we met through Senator Henry M. Jackson and his successful efforts with policymakers' and artists' coalitions to free ballet dancers Valery and Galina Panov. Their plans to immigrate from the Soviet Union to Israel were thwarted and they were imprisoned and subjected to psychological torture, until the U.S., U.K. and other countries spoke with one voice and they were free to live and dance where they wanted. The clear message you expressed about the Panovs' situation rings in my ears at this time—“Everyone needs and deserves justice.”

As you weigh the pleas of justice for Mr. Peltier, I call on your compassionate core and spirited record of fighting against injustice and for democratic institutions. Each and every person in this country deserves a fair trial and rectification if the institutions meant to protect them do not do so. Leonard Peltier deserves that. Leonard Peltier needs and deserves justice.

Mr. President, I urge you to grant clemency to Leonard Peltier or support his petition for compassionate release at the Bureau of Prisons. I am optimistic that you will find it in your heart to return Mr. Peltier to his Turtle Mountain homeland. Please send a birthday message to Mr. Peltier on September 12 to let him know that he is on your mind. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Nae'ese. Mvto. (Thank You in Tsistsistas and Mvskoke)

Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne & Hotvlkvke Mvskokvlke)
President, The Morning Star Institute