



SPEECH BY M. JACQUES CHIRAC, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, AT THE RECEPTION IN HONOUR OF THE AMERINDIAN PEOPLES

(Paris, 23 June 2004)

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It is a great joy and very moving for me to welcome a delegation of Amerindian representatives to the Elysée Palace, as I had the pleasure of doing eight years ago, on 20 June 1996.

I would like to thank the Minister for Tourism, my friend Løon Bertrand, who took the initiative of convening this new meeting, which he naturally felt was particularly important.

I would like to express my thanks to Zoila Hernandez, President of OKA Peru, who has kept the spirit of 1996 alive and federated Amerindian associations to foster dialogue between them and continue their struggle.

I am grateful to all the people in France who have demonstrated their solidarity with this cause and helped to organize this event.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

You who come from all over the Americas, you have kept alive in the different destinies of the countries where you live the memory of a common history, which was brutally interrupted five centuries ago by the advance of the conquerors who came in search of El Dorado.

You are the heirs to magnificent civilizations, mutilated by history, but which, as we have belatedly understood, gave humanity treasures of art and knowledge. The Mayan, Aztec, Inca, North American, Arawak and so many other civilizations, some of which are still living, the others lost, were all marked by the tragedy of the Conquest.

Your peoples were the victims of history and colonization. The tragic destruction of the empires of Central and South America by the invasion. The slow and violent disappearance of the Indians from the North American plains with the Conquest of the West. The brutal acculturation of the Inuit at the beginning of last century. Each time this meant deaths, destroyed and pillaged cities, enslaved lands, forbidden customs and denial of cultures.

From generation to generation, despite foreign domination, despite ostracism and stigmatization, your peoples have sustained the memory of those ancient



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times and preserved your languages, traditions, way of life and memory. You are the children of those nations, determined to remain faithful to their heritage and to regain a dignity denied you by past centuries.

France is moved by your fate. Espousing universalism and fraternity, we feel a shared responsibility in the future of the world and all its constituent communities, and, first of all, in the destiny of the most vulnerable, "the fragile flowers of difference", whose rights Claude LØvi-Strauss tirelessly defended.

France took part in the dark and glorious epic of Europe's conquest of the world. That is how France became American, by establishing settlements in what are now Canada and the United States and by taking possessions in the Caribbean and the Amazon Basin. That past lives on in the present: Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana are still part of France and contribute their talent and genius to the national community.

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Since our last meeting, the cause of indigenous peoples seems to have progressed. This can be seen on the American continent, where governments, each in its own way, are showing greater respect for the place, languages and cultures of indigenous peoples.

As examples I can cite the establishment of Nunavut, the first autonomous Inuit territory, a magnificent acknowledgement of the uniqueness of a people who now govern themselves within Canada.

There are the influential Indian associations in the United States of America, and the awareness that the American people now have of their duties and responsibilities towards the Indian peoples.

In Guatemala, which I visited last month, the rights of the Mayan community are being gradually restored. A sign of this is the role given to Ms Rigoberta Menchu Tum.

There is the increasingly open attitude of the countries of Latin America, which have become more sensitive to these issues since democracy is taking root and social progress is advancing.

These developments hold out hope. Hope that at last the wounds of history can be healed. Hope that at last your peoples will overcome the tragedies of the past. Hope that at last your cultures, stimulated by exchange with others, will find new strength and shine again in the world.

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At the same time, no one can remain indifferent to the silent tragedy still occurring before our eyes on all the continents: the slow disappearance of



minority cultures and languages, wiped out by dominant movements. Sixty years ago, Claude LØvi-Strauss told, in unforgettable prose, the sad story of the fate of the communities of Mato Grosso and the Amazon, which he feared would be doomed by history. He described as an irreparable loss the gradual disappearance of those peoples through epidemics we carry, deforestation we cause and men's greed. He deplored the slow death of cultures that we called "savage" because we did not understand the strength of their organizations, which reflected as much intelligence and thought as any other civilization.

The tragedy occurring in the Amazonian forests is also taking place on the steppes of boreal Europe and Central Asia, in the forests and on the savannahs of Africa, on the plains of the United States of America, in the jungles of South and South-East Asia and territories of the Pacific.

Everywhere, our consciences face the same persistent question. With their wealth of knowledge and a history that delves into the depths of human experience, how will these peoples, who have the same rights as all the peoples of the earth, even if they are not organized into nation-States, find their place in the modern world?

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France refuses to accept that gradual dissolution is inevitable. We also refuse the sham of reserves, where the last representatives of the most ancient ways of life would live cut off from the rest of the world as "witness peoples". We believe another way must be found. A way in which these tribes, clans and nations can follow the path to the form of modernity they choose, at their own pace, remaining true to themselves but participating fully in the issues of their time.

But to find that way, we need a bold new start. The new start for which you are fighting in your countries. The new start for which we are working at the UN, by preparing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, whose adoption must be the high point of the decade that is devoted to you.

I am not unaware of the difficulties of sovereign States, concerned about their independence and unity. But it is time for the particularity and dignity of your nations to be affirmed and protected under international law.

At issue is humanity's self-respect. At issue is globalization, often perceived as imposed Westernization and therefore as a threat to identities. At issue is the diversity of cultures and languages, without which there is no possible future. At issue is the legacy of our fathers and mothers, for which we are accountable to future generations. At issue is the extremely urgent cause of environmental protection. The way in which the modern world recognizes and addresses the issue of indigenous peoples will reflect its ability to bring about a new stage in human progress.

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The cause of indigenous peoples, seemingly so particular, is one of the major issues of our time. I want France to respond to this cause in a spirit of fraternity and generosity.

I hope that France will present an ambitious vision to Europe. With Chancellor Schröder, we have decided to create a working group tasked with putting forward proposals on ways in which the European Union can better understand and assist indigenous peoples. The group held its first meeting in Berlin. Naturally I call on the members to show generosity and imagination.

As far as France is concerned, the law already recognizes the difference of her Overseas Territories. Our country places great importance on the fact that these remote communities can enjoy their French identity while remaining loyal to their history.

This is why France recognizes individual statuses that differ from those of metropolitan France, and collective rights and customs that are not part of French legal tradition. We are proud to do this because we know that our Overseas Territories thus feel respected within the national community. We realize that the unity of the Republic and the unity of the French people are reinforced by the recognition of indigenous cultures.

Lastly, I am proud that France is moving forward on the Quai Branly Museum project. The museum will open in 2006 and I hope you will be able to attend.

In the meantime, with the Pavillon des Sessions, the Louvre Museum has corrected an egregious anomaly. Previously this pantheon of human creation had been blind to many cultures. It has at last opened up to them, to tell a more accurate story of the human adventure.

With the Quai Branly, a new ultra-modern museum will open. With its exceptional collections, it will of course be an aesthetic celebration. But it will also be an invitation to a dialogue, to an imaginary journey, a forum open to questions from scientists and from anyone curious about the world, and an initiation into the secrets and subtleties of cultures, which are sometimes very remote from, sometimes mysteriously close to those of Europe. In these times of violence, arrogance, intolerance and fanaticism, the Quai Branly Museum will be a new manifestation of France's faith in the virtues of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

France proposes to host a meeting of indigenous peoples of the world in 2006, to which your gathering is the prelude. The meeting will be a message of hope and a mark of confidence in the success of your struggle to regain possession of your communities and assert your rights and your place in the world. It will be an occasion for a new humanism, a new stage in the historic reconciliation,



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towards which, by wishing you the warmest welcome, I urge you to work with feeling, intelligence and sensitivity. |

