

We Were Never Promised Inclusion: The Growing Danger for Native Citizenship and Sovereignty in America

By Donna Loring

When I first listened to Rachel Maddow's podcast *Burn Order*, I couldn't help but think of my own people.

The story she tells of how Japanese American citizens were rounded up during World War II, stripped of their homes, businesses, and dignity felt deeply familiar. The motives behind their incarceration weren't just fear or wartime paranoia. As I listened, it became clear: it was also about **land and resources**. About removing people who were inconvenient to power. About exploiting crisis to consolidate control. And that resonated with the long history of Native Tribes in this country.

The United States has done this before. It took land from those it feared, those it dehumanized, those it could define as "other" even when they were citizens. And it used the machinery of government, from executive orders to silent bureaucrats, to make it look legal.

Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 was framed as benevolence but operated as **ethnic cleansing**. Native people were forcibly relocated from their homelands to make room for white settlement. Jackson's logic was clear: Indians were an obstacle to progress and removing them served the interests of Nation Building.

In his first message to Congress, Jackson openly questioned whether the Penobscot or other northeastern tribes had any place within state borders. He asked:

"Would the people of Maine permit the Penobscot tribe to erect an independent government within their State?"

This rhetorical question wasn't just about the Cherokee or the Muscogee. It was about all of us.

The underlying principle that Indigenous sovereignty is incompatible with the American state has echoed through centuries of U.S. policy. From the Trail of Tears to the boarding schools, from land allotment to termination, Native people have been treated not as citizens to be protected but as problems to be managed.

Donald Trump's administration carried that legacy forward. Under Trump, tribal sovereignty was routinely undermined: sacred lands were opened to oil drilling and mining, treaty obligations were ignored, and environmental protections gutted. The Dakota Access Pipeline and the reduction of Bears Ears National Monument were only the most visible examples. **More**

recently, Trump has doubled down on that agenda by removing protections for the Arctic and reopening lands like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling—again treating Indigenous lands as expendable resource zones rather than sovereign territories.

And Trump's impact did not end with his first term as president. His **current rhetoric and platform continue and even intensify the same mindset**. His 2025 Executive Order to narrow the definition of birthright citizenship is just one piece. His renewed calls for acquiring **Greenland**, despite Indigenous opposition, reflect a continued disregard for Native land and voice. And his messaging frames citizenship, immigration, and belonging in increasingly racialized and exclusionary terms.

Trump's legacy is not behind us it is still unfolding. And Native people, whose lands remain rich in oil, gas, timber, lithium, and fresh water, are again in the crosshairs of political ambition and extractive policy.

For Native people, the danger of being misidentified, detained, or treated as undocumented immigrants is not hypothetical it is lived reality. In cities like Minneapolis, Native citizens began carrying their tribal ID cards **not because of a legal directive**, but because ICE agents were detaining anyone who looked brown or Black without clear cause or legal grounding. The risk of being profiled, detained, or even deported is real.

In response, dozens of tribes began **waiving fees, lowering age requirements, and expediting tribal IDs** so members especially children could carry documentation proving they are U.S. citizens. This isn't administrative streamlining. It is survival.

As Jacqueline De León of the Native American Rights Fund said:

“As the first people of this land, there's no reason why Native Americans should have their citizenship questioned.”

And yet, here we are forced to carry proof of belonging in a country that rests on land taken from our ancestors.

Burn Order chronicles how U.S. officials during WWII planned the incarceration of over 100,000 Japanese Americans most of them citizens. The podcast details how officials even debated **stripping citizenship** as a workaround to get around legal barriers. And when they feared exposure, they ordered documents destroyed the literal "burn order."

The result? A population of American citizens lost their homes, businesses, and liberty. The government never had to formally revoke their citizenship. It just ignored it.

That history is not far from the logic we see today. Native lands are rich in **oil, lithium, uranium, forests, and water**. In a moment of global instability, rising nationalism, and climate anxiety, it's not hard to imagine a future administration arguing that Indigenous sovereignty or even citizenship is a threat to national development or security.

The U.S. has already shown a willingness to treat citizenship as **conditional**, especially for those whose existence complicates its agenda. As Maddow's series shows, legality is not a guarantee. It is a variable subject to the desires of power.

The U.S. Constitution never recognized Native Nations. We were left out categorized as "Indians not taxed," outside the circle of rights and representation. Our relationships to the federal government were framed through **treaties**, not constitutional guarantees and even those treaties have been continuously broken.

What little protection exists today for Native rights is often policy-based, not constitutionally enshrined. And policies can be changed. Executive orders can be written. Legal interpretations can shift. We've seen it happen often.

The threat is **plausible**. The legal tools exist. The precedent exists. And the political incentives to seize resources, to suppress sovereignty, to define belonging in narrower terms are gaining strength.

As Native people, we have survived forced removals, boarding schools, termination, and the foster care system that, in Maine, took the place of boarding schools. We've survived the criminalization of our languages, our ceremonies, our movements.

But survival is not justice. And endurance alone will not stop what's coming.

We are not strangers here. We are not a special interest. We are not an inconvenience to be worked around.

We remember. We prepare and we speak because the choices made now will shape the world our children inherit. Native people are not a footnote in history. We have never been. We are the first Nations of this land. We are not the enemy or the other we are part of this great country.