

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland: The integration of the Native American elite with the Democratic Party

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2 April 2021

On March 15, the US Senate voted 51-40 to confirm Democratic Representative Deb Haaland as the Interior Department's secretary under the Biden administration, making her the first Native American to hold any Cabinet position.

Her selection has been praised as a "historic moment" since she is a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe and thus is being portrayed as someone who will defend and fight for the interests of all Native American people.

"This is a big deal," tweeted Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on December 17, describing Haaland as "a visionary Native woman in charge of federal lands. Unequivocally progressive. Green New Deal champion. Exquisitely experienced."

Nathan Rott with National Public Radio wrote on the day of her confirmation, at which she wore traditional Native dress and ornaments: "Her confirmation is as symbolic as it is historic. For much of its history, the Interior Department was used as a tool of oppression against America's Indigenous peoples. In addition to managing the country's public lands, endangered species and natural resources, the department is also responsible for the government-to-government relations between the U.S. and Native American tribes."

Elle magazine published an essay by Crystal Echo Hawk, member of the Pawnee Nation in Oklahoma and nonprofit leader, headlined: "The Revolutionary Power of Deb Haaland." Echo Hawk wrote: "Deb Haaland's secretary of the Interior confirmation is transformational for Native people. Finally, a leader who can help Americans understand that we are human beings—not caricatures or mascots. We aren't peoples that don't exist anymore. We are here."

The gushing admiration for Haaland by major media outlets focuses exclusively on her cultural identity and personal story, as well as her support for Green New Deal reforms and environmental protections. These components allegedly make her the woman who will reverse Trump's reckless environmental policies, combat climate change, fight for working people and resolve the historic oppression of Native Americans in the United States, all within Biden's next four years.

In reality, Haaland is a longtime representative of the Democratic Party and American capitalism, including the capitalist ventures carried out on tribal lands. Her record as a businesswoman, successful campaigner and fundraiser for Democratic officials, and years as an elected representative in New Mexico have made it clear that she can be trusted to carry out the strategic aims of the Biden administration.

Her presence in the Cabinet is designed to provide Biden with a left cover. The Democratic Party is attempting to hide its true class policy—including the continuation of military aggression against China and Russia, horrific deportations of immigrants, fueling the spread of COVID-19 by reopening schools and workplaces before it is safe to do

so—with the promotion of racial, gender and sexual diversity.

Early years and rise to prominence

Haaland was born in Winslow, Arizona. She is an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo, located 45 miles west of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her mother is Native American and served in the United States Navy and later the Bureau of Indian Affairs, while her father, a Norwegian American from Minnesota, was an officer in the US Marine Corps and fought in the Vietnam War in the course of his military career.

Growing up in a military family, she moved throughout her life, then finally settled in Albuquerque, where she graduated from Highland High School. She often refers to her military background with pride, even serving on the Armed Services Committee and taking a trip to the Middle East during her two years in Congress.

After receiving her Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of New Mexico in 1994, she struggled to support her newborn child as a single mother, relying on food stamps at certain points until she graduated from UNM Law School in 2006. Haaland also started a small salsa business for additional income.

In 2007, she participated in a program with Emerge New Mexico, a nonprofit organization that develops women to run for elected office under the Democratic Party. This prepared her for her role in the Democratic Party and the management of tribal businesses, during which she established her own career while channeling social discontent among Native American and working class voters behind the Democrats in the aftermath of the 2008 recession.

By 2010, Haaland served as the Native American Vote Manager for the Democratic Party in the gubernatorial election won by Republican Susana Martinez. In 2012, she led the state's Native American voter drive for Barack Obama's reelection campaign, while also being the Native American Caucus Chair for the Democratic Party of New Mexico.

From 2013 to 2015, she was an administrator for the San Felipe Pueblo tribe. Then she ran for Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico in 2014 on the ticket with then-Attorney General Gary King, who has a record as an energy consultant for the state and federal governments. This ticket was defeated as Martinez won a second term.

Between 2015 and 2017, Haaland was the chair of the Democratic Party of New Mexico, praised for her hand in producing record fundraising and voter turnout. In a *Rolling Stone* interview from August 2018, she explained her time as chairwoman. "We had lost our Statehouse in 2014 after 60 years, and the party had accumulated seven years worth of debt. I

said I would pay off the debt and win back our Statehouse, and we did both.”

As chair of the state’s Democratic Party, she did not endorse either Sanders or Clinton in the race for the 2016 presidential nomination. Once it was clear that Clinton had won the primary contest, Haaland endorsed her and led the state party’s drive to get out the vote for her in 2016. A similar situation took place during the 2020 primaries, although Haaland was considered more favorable to Elizabeth Warren, who later advocated for her position in the Biden Cabinet.

In 2018, she ran in the Democratic Party primary election for the First Congressional District, for the seat left open when Representative Michelle Lujan Grisham ran for governor. In a contest with a heavy focus on identity politics, multiple Hispanic candidates split the vote and Haaland won the primary with 41 percent. She won the general election easily, joining Sharice Davids of Kansas as the first two Native American woman ever elected to Congress.

Her congressional record includes supporting every major element of the Democratic Party’s platform. She supports “comprehensive immigration reform,” which is code for a supposedly “humane” deportation of undocumented immigrants. She encourages “business-friendly policies” to lure businesses to areas with low tax rates to “create jobs.” During the pandemic, she voted for the CARES Act in March 2020, which funneled around \$4 trillion into the financial markets while allowing COVID-19 to spread throughout the country.

Her support for the Democrats’ pro-corporate and anti-worker policies is masked behind her focus on token measures to address “environmental justice, climate change, missing and murdered indigenous women, and family-friendly policies [at workplaces].”

Laguna Development Corporation and the Native elite

Notably, in the course of her political activity between 2010 and 2015, Haaland also served on the Laguna Development Corporation (LDC) Board of Directors and became the first appointed chairwoman of the organization.

LDC is a business management firm led by a board of Native American, Hispanic and white executives, who oversee tribal retail, gaming, food and beverage, entertainment and hospitality enterprises. They currently manage Route 66 Casino, Thunder Road Steakhouse & Cantina, Legends Theater, Dancing Eagle Casino and over two dozen other sites. Its website states that the LDC’s “vision is to be a multi-billion dollar diversified corporation. Through its people and successful business development we will achieve a return on shareholder equity greater than our industry.”

The profits generated from these corporate enterprises are presented as ways to fund welfare programs, education and other public resources on tribal lands, needed since the federal government provides abysmally low levels of resources and support. In 1988, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed to allow tribes to operate full-scale casino gambling to generate revenue to use however they wish. By 2013, annual Indian gaming revenue reached \$28.3 billion.

A tiny elite layer of the Native population has profited from this arrangement, while the vast majority of the Native community exists as the most oppressed social layer in American society. Tom Love, for example, is a member of the Chickasaw Tribe in Oklahoma with a net worth of \$5 billion from his ownership of the “Love’s Travel Stops and Country Stores” chain.

The Laguna Development Corporation incorporates this privileged capitalist layer of the Pueblo tribes in New Mexico. Board members often have a background with oil and gas companies, agricultural business. One

current member, Maxine Velasquez, managed the Laguna Construction Company, which held multiple contracts with the US Air Force and military.

Throughout her own time on the board, the “unequivocally progressive” Haaland completely accepted this capitalist framework and ties to the US war machine (which she grew up in) and was praised as a corporate leader, who pushed Laguna to adopt “commitments to earth-friendly business practices.”

A “left” face in the right-wing Biden administration

Her actual political record runs counter to the conventional narrative that Haaland will fight for the urgent needs of the Native American population, the environment and the working class. This presentation is designed to capture the increasingly left-wing and progressive sentiments among workers and youth in order to sow illusions in the Democratic Party in a time of immense social and political crisis.

The Biden administration, like the Democratic Party as a whole, is using identity politics to give a “left” gloss to a conventionally right-wing, pro-capitalist and militaristic administration. At the time of his inauguration, all media attention was on the diversity of the Cabinet members.

At the first official meeting of the Cabinet, held Thursday, the main focus of the media was the contrast between Trump’s Cabinet, 75 percent white males, and Biden’s, with the first gay Cabinet member, nearly half women, the first Native American, the first black Pentagon chief, and so on. Of the 23 Cabinet-level positions filled by Biden, 11 are female, 12 are nonwhite, and only six are straight white males.

All, of course, are proven defenders of the capitalist system and of American imperialism. The gay Secretary of Transportation was an intelligence officer in Afghanistan. The black Pentagon chief oversaw the war in Iraq and then all US military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia. The female Secretary of the Treasury opened the financial spigots for Wall Street during her term as chief of the Federal Reserve Board. The Hispanic Secretary of Education, a former teacher, made his name from his ruthless drive to reopen schools in Connecticut despite the pandemic.

The Native American population faces extremely difficult circumstances of deep poverty and social isolation, compounded now by the pandemic. None of these conditions will be altered by the elevation of a Native American to head the Department of Interior, which includes oversight of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, long the spearhead of the oppression of Native Americans, particularly those living on tribal reservation lands.

Haaland will follow in the footsteps of countless African American and Hispanic mayors and police chiefs, whose installation has done nothing to alter the conditions of poverty and oppression faced by black and Hispanic workers in the major cities. Capitalist politics, whether the faces are white or black or brown, offers nothing to working class. The question is the building of an independent political movement to unite the working class on the basis of a socialist program.



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