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**Jack Malotte Perspective**



## Former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell walks on



Former Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, who first came to Congress as a Democrat but later switched to the GOP, has died at age 92. [Read more...](#)

### [Spirit Seeker Solution](#) ·

In our Cheyenne way, it takes 4 nights to travel to the other side, in the first 3 nights your spirit goes visits people, places and things you love and on the 4th night after the darkest hour they start their journey across the Milky Way to the camp on the other side. This is my prayer for my fellow Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell, who lived 4+ lives in one and had many places to visit. He was an athlete and Olympian, a former Congress man and Senator, a master jeweller and artist; and a fellow horseman and Chief. When I visited him at his home a few weeks ago, his wife Linda said he still felt like he had not done enough. I assured them he had lived many lives in one and did a lot for our Cheyenne people. From the designation of the Sand Creek Massacre Site, to adding the Indigenous story to the Little Bighorn National Monument and he came and stood with us during one of our darkest times: when our sacred Covenant, our grandmother, the sacred Buffalo Hat, was kidnapped, as the papers documented at the time. Many of our people died over the period of a couple of months. As the Senator from Colorado Ben Nighthorse Campbell met with then President Bill Clinton on Martin Luther King Day 1995 and shared the concerns of our people, and Bill Clinton sent a note sharing in the pain for the tragedy suffered by our people. Within days we had the largest Chiefs' meeting from then till now, on my father Chief Phillip Whiteman Sr.'s land and they instructed the societies to recover the Sacred Hat. My mother, Florence Whiteman, the last warrior woman of the Cheyenne, went with them and

ensured the peaceful return of our grandmother who had been kept under armed guard. We are grateful to Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell who sat as a fellow chief in the circle. After my father made his journey and I was seated as a Chief, Ben gave away to me at Lame Deer at the Fourth of July Pow wow. Working on things like getting Genocide Against Native Americans recognized in legislation in Colorado I would seek his counsel. When I visited him a few weeks ago, his mind was as sharp as ever, still he told me he was tired, so I sang him the Chiefs' song and his energy perked right back up. I know Ben carried some of the red paint from my painter the late Austin Two Moons Sr. and since I carry his paint, I will use some of that beautiful red paint that our mother the creator used to create the first human, a Cheyenne woman, in ceremony tomorrow, to mark Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell's transition and hopefully bring solace to his loving family and people.

Heove ve'keso (Yellow Bird) Northern Cheyenne traditional Chief Phillip Whiteman Jr.

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["If I ever wanted to be remembered for one single thing above all others, it would be that museum—because I am a firm believer that you can't have a good future unless you learn from the past."—Ben Nighthorse Campbell \(Northern Cheyenne, 1933-2025\)](#)

[We remember Ben Nighthorse Campbell, former United States legislator, veteran, Olympian, artist, and early supporter of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Born in Auburn, CA in 1933, Campbell's childhood was filled with hardship, with time spent in orphanages or on the streets. His mother suffered from tuberculosis and his father was often absent, struggling with alcoholism. Campbell would flatten silver dollars on railroad tracks to make jewelry and trade it for food. As a troubled teen, he was arrested for minor offenses. While working as a fruit picker in Sacramento, he met Japanese immigrants who taught him the martial art of judo. He often credited judo with keeping him off the streets and out of jail.](#)

[Realizing he was on the wrong path, Campbell enlisted in the US Air Force and volunteered to fight in the Korean War. He earned his GED, and with the GI Bill, he graduated from San Jose State University in 1957 with degrees in physical education and fine arts. From 1960-1964, he attended Tokyo's Meiji University, home to one of the world's top judo programs. He won gold in the 1963 Pan American Games, and captained the 1964 US Olympic judo team. In 1966, he married Colorado public school teacher Linda Price, and together they had two children, Shanana and Colin.](#)

[Campbell's legacy of service marked several firsts in US history. Not only was he the first Native American on the US Olympic judo team, but he was also the first Olympian-turned-politician to serve in both houses of Congress, representing Colorado throughout his career. Campbell was the first Native American to chair the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. A staunch advocate for Native issues, he sponsored the 1989 legislation establishing our museum. In September 2004, after our building on the National Mall opened, Campbell was the first Native American to appear on the Senate floor in full regalia.](#)

[After retiring from Congress, Campbell returned to his early love of art making. He often sold his jewelry at the Sante Fe Indian Market, and won more than 200 national and international honors. Campbell's work was featured in exhibitions at the museum, and some of his pieces remain in our care as part of our collection. He stayed close to the museum in his later years, co-](#)

[chairing the National Native American Veterans Memorial Advisory Committee. This role tied together his longstanding commitment to the museum and Native communities, and his military service. Campbell said “We have so much to celebrate. Like so many others, I was compelled to serve to honor the warrior tradition that is inherent to most Native American societies — the pillars of strength, honor, pride, devotion and wisdom.”](#)

[In this video from 2020 about the opening of the National Native American Veterans Memorial, Campbell shared his pride in supporting the creation of the museum and memorial on our grounds. If not for the efforts and contributions of Ben Nighthorse Campbell, our museum would not be a reality for the millions who have walked through our doors. Campbell passed on December 30 at his home on Nighthorse Ranch in Colorado, surrounded by his family. Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian](#)

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## [White House](#)      [Trump issues first vetoes of second term](#)

### **Previously noncontroversial water, tribal bills**

By [Niels Lesniewski](#)      [Posted December 31, 2025 at 6:54am](#)

The president vetoed measures that were seen as largely non-controversial, with both easily passing the Senate before the Christmas holiday break. But in one case, the president made clear that the veto was related to opposition to his agenda.

The bill in question pertains to land use rights for a Native American tribe in South Florida. Specifically, the vetoed measure would incorporate the Miccosukee Tribe’s Osceola Camp residential village in Everglades National Park into the tribe’s legal Reserved Area of the park.

“Despite seeking funding and special treatment from the Federal Government, the Miccosukee Tribe has actively sought to obstruct reasonable immigration policies that the American people decisively voted for when I was elected,” Trump said in his veto message to Congress.

The tribe is among the litigants opposing the Trump administration’s efforts to operate a migrant detention facility known as “Alligator Alcatraz” adjacent to tribal land.

“My Administration is committed to preventing American taxpayers from funding projects for special interests, especially those that are unaligned with my Administration’s policy of removing violent criminal illegal aliens from the country,” the president told Congress in returning the bill. “Ending the massive cost of taxpayer handouts and restoring fiscal sanity is vital to economic growth and the fiscal health of the Nation.”

The bill passed the House by voice vote on July 14, with the Senate clearing the measure by unanimous consent on Dec. 11.

The connection between opposition to White House policies is not quite as transparent with the other bill vetoed Tuesday. That measure relates to financing of a water supply pipeline project in Colorado. Construction on the estimated \$1.4 billion conduit began in April 2023.

The bill would modify the cost-sharing plan for the Arkansas Valley Conduit water pipeline project by extending from 50 to 75 years the local share repayment period and by reducing the interest rate for payments.

“H.R. 131 would continue the failed policies of the past by forcing Federal taxpayers to bear even more of the massive costs of a local water project — a local water project that, as initially conceived, was supposed to be paid for by the localities using it,” Trump said in his veto message.

Rep. Lauren Boebert, a Colorado Republican, shared a statement posted on X in which she said in part, “I sincerely hope this veto has nothing to do with political retribution for calling out corruption and demanding accountability.”

Boebert, who had been among the Republicans vocal in challenging the administration over releasing files related to the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, was more measured in the official statement.

“It is very disappointing that President Trump vetoed my bipartisan bill that passed both the House and Senate unanimously. This action blocks completion of a critical water infrastructure project that would deliver clean drinking water to 50,000 people in Southeast Colorado,” she said. “This fight is not over.”

Colorado generally has been the subject of Trump’s ire recently, wanting to pardon former Mesa County Clerk Tina Peters, who was convicted in state court of charges related to 2020 election interference and the efforts to overturn Joe Biden’s victory that year.

In addition to this week’s veto, the Trump administration has moved ahead on relocating Space Command from Colorado to Alabama and intends to dismantle the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder.

The Colorado measure passed the House by voice vote July 21, and the Senate – also by voice vote – Dec. 16. The measures originated in the House, and will need to be considered for potential veto overrides. Two-thirds votes are required for the bills to become law over Trump’s objections. *Allison Schoepner and Karin Fuog contributed to this report.*



*The Paiute | We Shall Remain: A Native History of Utah [FULL EPISODE]*



Part of a powerful five-part-series on the five American Indian Tribes of the Great Basin Region. [#weshallremain](#) [#paiute](#) [#americanindian](#) A thriving horticultural society, the Southern Paiute were a peaceful, foraging people whose social ties created a network that spread thro ...  
[Unknown Facts](#) ·

**At 82 years old, Marie Wilcox faced a heartbreaking truth:** she was the last fluent speaker of Wukchumni, a Native American language from California. When she realized that her language could disappear forever with her, she chose to act.

With no prior computer experience, Marie taught herself how to use one. Day after day, she sat at a keyboard, carefully typing Wukchumni from memory—word by word, meaning by meaning.

For nearly seven years, she worked with quiet determination, driven by the responsibility she felt toward her ancestors and future generations.



Her efforts resulted in a remarkable 6,000-word Wukchumni dictionary, preserving the language in written form. She also helped create audio recordings so learners could hear the true sound and rhythm of the language as it was meant to be spoken.

Marie Wilcox passed away in 2021, but because of her dedication, Wukchumni lives on—not just as words on a page, but as a voice rescued from silence. [#fblifestyle](#)

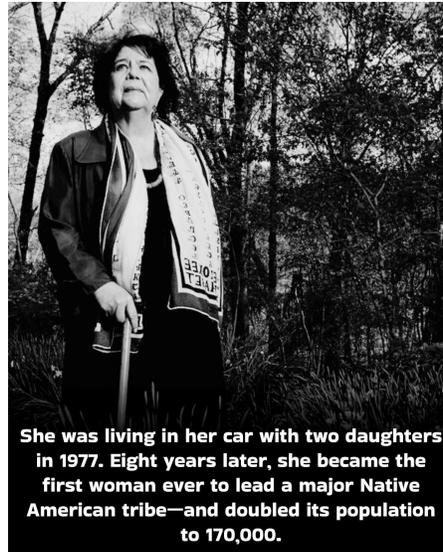
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[Native American Christmas Combo](#)  
[YouTube · Goleta & Santa Ynez Valley Libraries](#)  
[Nov 24, 2021](#)

[The Twelve Days of Native Christmas Trailer](#)  
[YouTube · Vision Maker Media](#)  
[Dec 17, 2009](#)

[Native American Night Before Christmas - Read Aloud ...](#)  
[YouTube · So'oh Story Time](#)  
[Dec 23, 2024](#)

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## [Virginia Sanchez](#)



She was living in her car with two daughters in 1977. Eight years later, she became the first woman ever to lead a major Native American tribe—and doubled its population to 170,000. Wilma Mankiller was 11 years old when the federal government came for her family. It was 1956. The Bureau of Indian Affairs had a program called "relocation." The official story was opportunity—move Native families from reservations to cities, give them job training, help them "assimilate." The real goal was termination: disband tribes, sell reservation lands, make Native Americans disappear into urban America.

Wilma's family lived on Mankiller Flats in Oklahoma—160 acres of ancestral land her grandfather received as settlement after the government forced the Cherokee from their homeland in the 1830s Trail of Tears. Now, barely a century later, the government was relocating them again.

They moved to a housing project in San Francisco. Wilma's father became a union worker. Her mother tried to make a home in a place that felt nothing like home. Wilma attended schools where teachers presented Columbus "discovering" America while she sat there knowing her people had lived there for thousands of years. She later called it "my own little Trail of Tears."

At 17, Wilma married an Ecuadorian man she barely knew. They had two daughters. She was living the life expected of her—married young, raising children, trying to fit into American society that insisted Native people should blend in and disappear.

Then, in 1969, everything changed.

Native American activists occupied Alcatraz Island, citing a treaty that gave Indigenous people the right to claim unused federal land. The occupation lasted 19 months. Thousands of Native people participated. It became a catalyst for Indigenous rights movements across America. Wilma went to Alcatraz. She volunteered. She met activists fighting for tribal sovereignty, for treaty rights, for recognition that Native nations still existed despite a century of government efforts to erase them.

For the first time since leaving Oklahoma, Wilma felt like she belonged somewhere. She started working with the Pit River Tribe in their legal battle against Pacific Gas and Electric over millions of acres of tribal land. She learned practical applications of sovereignty and treaty law. She directed Oakland's Native American Youth Center, working with Indigenous children growing up disconnected from their heritage.

Wilma was finding her purpose—but her marriage wasn't surviving the transformation. In 1974, she and her husband divorced.

In 1977, Wilma made a decision: she was going home.

She packed up her two daughters and drove back to Oklahoma. No job. No plan. She was 31 years old, recently divorced, with two children depending on her.

For a while, she lived in her car parked by a stream.

She couldn't find work. After 20 years away, she'd lost connections with her community. People didn't know her. She didn't know them. Coming home after the forced relocation of her childhood felt like trying to belong to a place that had moved on without her.

But Wilma didn't give up. She started volunteering in tribal affairs. She campaigned for health programs and schools. Eventually, she landed a job as economic stimulus coordinator for the Cherokee Nation.

Then she got an opportunity that would change everything.

There was a small Cherokee community called Bell, Oklahoma. Two hundred families. No running water. No electricity. High unemployment. Residents felt powerless, defeated, stuck in poverty while the rest of America moved forward without them.

The Cherokee Nation asked Wilma to help.

Most development coordinators would have brought in outside contractors, built the infrastructure, and left. Wilma had a different idea.

What if the community built it themselves?

She believed that Native communities had been trained to feel helpless—decades of government programs that did things for them had stripped away confidence in their own abilities. What if instead of passive recipients, they became active participants?

Wilma organized the residents of Bell. She got them a federal grant. Then she asked them to build their own 16-mile waterline.

People thought she was crazy. These were families struggling to survive. How could they construct a major infrastructure project?

But Wilma understood something important: people who build their own solutions don't just gain infrastructure—they gain belief in themselves.

For 14 months, the families of Bell worked. They dug trenches. They laid pipe. They solved problems. They worked collectively for the common good.

And they built the waterline.

It worked. Families had running water for the first time. More importantly, they'd proven they could solve their own problems. The sense of helplessness lifted. The community transformed. While recruiting volunteers for the Bell project, Wilma met Charlie Soap, a full-blood Cherokee who spoke fluent Cherokee and practiced traditional ways. They married in 1986.

In 1983, Cherokee Principal Chief Ross Swimmer needed a running mate for his reelection campaign. He asked Wilma to be deputy chief.

People were shocked. The Cherokee had never had a woman deputy chief. Many opposed it openly. Traditional gender roles ran deep. Some argued a woman couldn't lead.

Swimmer and Mankiller won.

In 1985, Swimmer resigned to lead the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington. Wilma Mankiller became Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation.

She was the first woman ever to lead a major Native American tribe.

The backlash was immediate. Death threats arrived. Some Cherokee threatened to move off the reservation if a woman was chief. Critics said she was unqualified, that she'd gotten the position through politics not merit, that the Cherokee Nation would collapse under female leadership.

Wilma kept working.

In 1987, she ran for Principal Chief in her own right—not as someone inheriting the position, but as a candidate the people had to choose.

She won.

Four years later, in 1991, she ran again.

She won with 83% of the vote.

During her 10 years as Principal Chief, Wilma transformed the Cherokee Nation.

When she took office, Cherokee enrollment was 68,000. By the time she left, it had grown to 170,000. Tribal revenues nearly doubled. She opened three new rural health centers. She expanded Head Start programs for Cherokee children. She created job centers. She brought businesses to Cherokee jurisdiction. She established literacy programs for adults.

She founded the Institute for Cherokee Literacy to preserve Cherokee language and culture—recognizing that tribal identity wasn't just about economics but about maintaining heritage the government had spent a century trying to erase.

She managed a \$75 million budget serving 140,000 enrolled members.

And she completely transformed the relationship between the Cherokee Nation and the federal government.

For decades, that relationship had been paternalistic—the government doing things to or for Native people, never with them. Wilma insisted on nation-to-nation consultation. She demanded tribal sovereignty be respected. She demonstrated that Native nations were governments, not charity cases.

President Bill Clinton appointed her as an adviser on tribal affairs. Other tribal leaders across America adopted her community development model. Thirty-five states implemented versions of her programs.

In 1987, Ms. Magazine named her Woman of the Year.

In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

In 1998, President Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation's highest civilian honor.

Her autobiography, "Mankiller: A Chief and Her People," became a national bestseller. Gloria Steinem, who became a close friend, reviewed it: "As one woman's journey, Mankiller opens the heart. As the history of a people, it informs the mind."

But Wilma's success came despite constant health crises.

In 1979, she'd been in a near-fatal car accident. The other driver—her best friend—was killed. Wilma barely survived. She endured 17 surgeries and months of recovery.

Then came myasthenia gravis, a neuromuscular disease. Then polycystic kidney disease requiring two kidney transplants. Then lymphoma. Then breast cancer.

In 1995, worn down by health problems, Wilma chose not to run for a fourth term. She was 49.

She didn't stop working. She taught at Dartmouth. She consulted for the federal Children's Bureau. She represented the United States on the League of Nations Health Committee. She continued writing, speaking, advocating for Indigenous rights and women's leadership.

She often spoke about the Iroquois principle of seven generations: "Leaders are encouraged to remember seven generations in the past and consider seven generations in the future when making decisions that affect the people."

Wilma lived that principle. Everything she did was about long-term thinking—not quick fixes, but sustainable solutions that would benefit Cherokee people for generations.

In 2010, Wilma Mankiller died of pancreatic cancer at age 64.

Her funeral was attended by thousands, including Gloria Steinem and Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry. President Barack Obama issued a statement: "As the Cherokee Nation's first female chief, she transformed the Nation-to-Nation relationship between the Cherokee Nation and the Federal Government and served as an inspiration to women in Indian Country and across America."

Gloria Steinem, who was with Wilma when she died, said: "Ancient traditions call for setting signal fires to light the way home for a great one; fires were lit in 23 countries after Wilma's death."

In 2021, Wilma Mankiller's image appeared on the U.S. quarter—part of the American Women Quarters program. She joined Maya Angelou, Sally Ride, and other pioneering women honored on American currency.

Think about the arc of Wilma's life.

Born in 1945 to a Cherokee family living on ancestral land earned through forced removal.

Forcibly relocated again at age 11 as part of government termination policy.

Grew up in San Francisco housing projects, pressured to assimilate, expected to disappear into American society.

Found herself at 31 —divorced, broke, living in a car with two daughters.

Eight years later, she was Principal Chief leading 140,000 people with a \$75 million budget. She doubled tribal enrollment. She revolutionized Cherokee healthcare. She changed how the federal government interacts with Native nations. She proved that Indigenous communities possessed solutions to their own problems—they just needed support, not paternalism. She demonstrated that women could lead major tribes despite centuries of patriarchal tradition. She did all of this while enduring 17 surgeries, two kidney transplants, and multiple life-threatening illnesses.

And she never forgot where she came from.

Wilma lived on Mankiller Flats—her grandfather's allotment—until she died. The place the government had tried to take from her family. The place they'd been forced to leave in 1956. The place she'd returned to in 1977 with nothing but determination.

She wanted to be remembered for emphasizing that Indigenous people have indigenous solutions to their problems. That tribes don't need saviors—they need sovereignty, resources, and respect. Before Wilma Mankiller, young Cherokee girls never imagined they might grow up and become chief.

After Wilma Mankiller, they knew they could.

Most Americans have never heard of her. Most don't know the first woman to lead a major Native American tribe. Most don't know about the woman who lived in her car and became a Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient. Most don't know about the leader who doubled her nation's population and transformed how the federal government treats tribal sovereignty.

Now you do.

In honor of Wilma Mankiller (1945-2010), who proved that the most powerful way to help a community is to believe in its ability to help itself—and who showed that leadership isn't about power over people, but empowerment of people.

