

Testimony to the Senate Government & Veterans Affairs Committee

Senate Bill 2305

Andrew Alexis Varvel

February 4, 2021

Itǰáŋčhaŋ Vedaá na Kǰamíte Óyapǰapi:

Andrew Alexis Varvel emáčiyapelo. Tǰaspáŋ Ožú-yata waúŋ.

Chairman Vedaá and Members of the Committee:

My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel. I live in Bismarck.

Nitháwačhiŋ ečhíčiyapi wačhíŋ. Nitháčhaŋte nakúŋ ečhíčiyapi wačhíŋ. Yunǰháŋ, Lakǰótiyapi na Šaglášiyapi blaáthŋaŋiŋ iblámniŋ kte.

I want to speak to your mind. I also want to speak to your heart. So, I will begin this testimony in Lakota and English.

Šakówiŋkiya ilúthapo. Wáŋčala luksápo.

Measure seven times. Cut once.

Toháŋ waniyetu mašákpe, iná opǰéthŋuŋ ognáke. “AǰÚYAPI ĞÍĜÍLA TǰÓGNAKE” tǰacháže. Kuŋkúnla gnáke. “AǰÚYAPI ĞÍĜÍLA TǰÓGNAKE” tǰacháže čaŋkhé hepǰhé “lé aǰúyapi ğíĝíla tǰógnake” epǰhé ló. Iná kuŋkúnla gnáke čaŋkhé heyé “lé kuŋkúnla tǰógnake” eyé ló.

When I was six years old, my mother bought a jar. It was labeled “COOKIE JAR”. She stored pickles in it. I called it a cookie jar because it was labeled “COOKIE JAR”. My mother said it was a pickle jar because it had pickles in it.

Kǰamíte lé ognáke hé sékse. Unǰnáš ognáke aǰúyapi ğíĝíla úŋ kte. Unǰnáš ognáke kuŋkúnla úŋ kte.

This commission is like that jar. Maybe it will hold cookies. Maybe it will hold pickles.

Truth commissions come in many varieties. Some work. Others don't. Some commissions have a narrow focus. Other commissions have a broad focus. We should learn what works.

This proposal should be taken seriously. If it goes forward, it needs to be done right. This is precisely why your committee should turn this legislation into a study resolution.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Maine and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada had a narrow focus – boarding school.

The road of Indian boarding schools in the United States was paved with good intentions.

Vice President Charles Curtis was the first – and only – Indian vice president. His mother was Kanza. His father was Euro-American. He lived with his maternal grandmother – his *ikonj*. To save his life, his grandmother ordered him to live with his paternal grandmother.

So, Charles Curtis learned the ways of “white privilege”. He prospered. He became an attorney. He became a Congressman. He became a US Senator. He became the Majority Leader of the US Senate. He eventually became the Vice President of the United States.

Vice President Curtis favored assimilation so other Indians could share his privilege. This was a tragedy. He was not the only person to imagine that other people wanted the privileges he had enjoyed. And yet, not everybody – of any race – wants his privilege. Liberty means the freedom to choose traditional ways. Liberty means the freedom to chart one's own course.

In A Brief History of North Dakota (1925), Herbert Clay Fish and R. M. Black wrote the following about the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara:

“They are jealous of their old mother tongues and are slow to give them up for the white man's language. Nearly all of the young men speak English, but the middle aged and the old men and women cling tenaciously to the original languages.”

Think about the word “cling”. It stings. It stings to anybody who can feel even the slightest amount of conservatism. It stings from an arrogance which presumes its superiority.

If this commission is controlled by Indian tribes with a focus on only Indian trauma, it could easily become a grievance commission. Do you want to vent to a brick wall or do you want other people to listen? It is not a conversation when only certain people can speak.

No group has a monopoly over intergenerational trauma. Sioux County remembers three men lynched in Emmons County in 1897. It got nationwide coverage, including the front page of a black newspaper called “The World” printed in the Twin Cities. The culture of Emmons County got imprinted by the murder of the Spicer family earlier that year. Each event was an atrocity. People tend to remember what was done to them, not necessarily what was done to others.

Measure seven times. Cut once.

Please turn SB 2305 into a study resolution. Failing that, it would better if it did not pass.

Thank you.

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This is a pickle jar when it holds pickles.

