

1996 ACCEPTANCE STATEMENT OF

Winona LaDuke

for Green Party's Nomination
for Vice President of the United States of America

Aniin indinawaymuginiitook. Niin gagwe gitimaagis noongom. Beenaysikwe indigo, idash, Winona LaDuke indizhinikaaz, Makwa niin dodaem. Gahwah bah bahnikaag ishkoniginiing indoojibaa. Miigwetch, Mazinnaggain ininiwug, Miigwetch indinawaymuginiitook.

I am here to announce today that it is with great honor that I am joining with Ralph Nader and the Green Party in a national effort in this presidential campaign. I will be his vice presidential running mate.

As Mr. Nader has previously stated, we intend to stand with others around this country as the catalyst for the creation of a new model of electoral politics; not to run any campaign. This will be a campaign for democracy waged by private citizens who choose to become public citizens.

I am not inclined toward electoral politics. Yet I am impacted by public policy. I am interested in reframing the debate on the issues of this society -- the distribution of power and wealth, the abuse of power and the rights of the natural world, the environment and the need to consider an amendment to the U.S. Constitution in which all decisions made today will be considered in light of their impact on the seventh generation from now. That is, I believe, what sustainability is all about. These are vital subjects which are all too often neglected by the rhetoric of "major party" candidates and the media.

I believe that decision making should not be the exclusive right of the privileged. That those who are affected by policy -- not those who by default often stand above it -- should be heard in the debate. It is the absence of this voice which unfortunately has come to characterize American public policy and the American political system.

As most of you probably know I live and work on the White Earth reservation in Northern Minnesota, the largest reservation in the state in terms of population and land base. And as most of you know -- in terms of recent political and legal struggles -- the site of a great deal of citizen activism and change in recent months. That is how I view myself, as a citizen activist. Yet I find that as small and rural as is my area of the northwoods, as small as my pond, the decisions made in Washington still affect me. And it is that fact, that decisions made by others, people who have never seen my face, never seen our lakes, never tasted our wild rice or heard the cry of a child in Ponsford have come to impact me and my community. I am here to say that all people have the right and responsibility to determine their destiny and I do not relinquish this right to PACS, to lobbyists and to decision makers who are far away.

When you live in one of the poorest sections of the country and in the State of Minnesota,

you are able to understand, perhaps better, the impact of public policy. It is indeed my contention that there is no real quality of life in America until there is quality of life in the poorest regions of this America.

For instance over half of the American Indians on my reservation live in poverty. This represents five times the state average. Of particular concern is that nearly two thirds of the children on my reservation live in poverty. Also 90 percent of the children in female headed households live in impoverished conditions. Median family income on my reservation is just slightly above half the state average for median income. Per capita income is at the same level. Unemployment on the reservation is at 49 percent according to recent BIA statistics. And nearly one-third of all Indians on the reservation have not attained a high school diploma. Finally it is absolutely critical to note that approximately 50 percent of the population on the reservation is under 25 years of age, indicating that these problems will need to be addressed over the long term.

What does that mean in the larger picture? Let me give you some examples.

Welfare reform legislation.

This is the nation leading the world in terms of number of people in poverty. There are some 9 million children in this country in poverty. Welfare reform eliminates the safety net for those children. Now let me tell you about some real people. Native Americans are the poorest people in the country. Four out of 10 of the poorest counties in the nation are on Indian reservations. This is the same as White Earth. My daughters entire third grade class with few exceptions is below the poverty level. The only choice those parents have with any hope -- with 45 percent unemployment -- is to work at the casino at about six bucks an hour. With two parents working and paying child care expenses makes them ostensibly the working poor. Not much different than being in poverty. So my friends, a family of seven who live in a two bedroom trailer down the road from me -- a fifteen year old trailer -- on AFDC have few options under the new welfare reform plan. I will not stand by mute as the safety net is taken away from those children and that third grade class.

Environmental policy. This is a long list.

WTI Incinerator is a hazardous incinerator in East Liverpool Ohio located less than 1,000 feet from a school. It was visited by Al Gore in 1992 where he pledged if elected, it would not open. It did.

Endangered species. Bill Clinton said in 1992 that he would not allow a weakening of the endangered species act, yet he signed an appropriations bill in 1994 that prohibits any funds to be used to uplist or list any species under the endangered species act. This put a freeze on any action on over 1000 species that are waiting to be listed under the act.

Our forests. The salvage rider. Clinton vetoed the first version of this, then signed it the second time when it was attached to an appropriations bill for the Oklahoma City bombing victims, later claiming that he never thought the timber industry could use it to get around the laws. In total salvage available for future harvest in the Northern Rockies alone is equivalent to 237,000 logging trucks full of trees. Nationally, 900,000 logging trucks full of

trees. Allowable cuts are now acceptable under headings like "winter injury," "poor vigor," "old age," and "to realize forest productivity" broad and subjective terminology. This situation is of course mimicked in the Superior National Forest.

What is my experience in this? I come from a forest culture. Our creation stories are about those forests, our ancestors are buried there, our food, our medicinal plants our relatives live in those forests. We call them forests, but they are viewed by Potlatch, Blandin and Champion as board feet of timber.

Now let me ask you a question. How is it that when the people of the White Earth reservation ask the federal government for the return of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge or to manage the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge -- lands taken illegally from our people -- we are refused or put off? Yet these same lands are basically given to Potlatch and Champion. Why is it that the state and other officials refer to last year's wind shear on my reservation that took down over 200,000 acres of trees as a natural disaster? Yet Potlatch expands present mills and they will be cutting a square mile of Minnesota's northwoods daily -- the equivalent of an eight foot pile of logs piled across both the north and south bound lanes of 35W from Minneapolis to Duluth -- and that is referred to as economic growth.

Who's going to be there when all those trees are gone? Who will be there when there are no forests except for a monoculture popple and tree farms. You can't eat money.

How about Indian policy? Lots of promises and no action. Two free lunches, some Kodak moments and immense budget cuts. Indian policy has come far in America, there's no question. Until almost the end of the 19th Century Indians were dealt with by the Department of War. Since then Indian people have been in the Department of Interior, we are the only humans in the Department of Interior treated as a natural resource. This is a problem in budget cuts. Literally we are fighting with ducks over appropriations. Is that changing? Right now in the international arena the U.S. State Department is opposing the classification of indigenous peoples under international law as peoples. Peoples have rights under international law and those rights are not the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of member states. We are arguing that we have fundamental rights to self-determination, to language, land, territory, natural resources and our children. And the U.S. State Department is opposing our human rights.

Now a question you may ask me is: can a person who lives in the north woods of Minnesota have thoughts big enough for national policy debate or international policy? I would argue yes. In fact I would question the inverse. Can men of privilege -- who do not feel the impact of policies on forests, children or their ability to breastfeed their children -- actually have the compassion to make public policy that is reflective of the interests of others. At this point I think not.

I have seen my neighbors, small farmers in northern Minnesota, go under while corporate agriculture subsidies in the sunbelt mount. I have seen dairy cows with x's on their foreheads for the dairy termination program leave on cattle cars never to return, and I have been at too many farm auctions to feel that things are good on the farm. I know the difference between water quality on a small dairy farm and that on a 3,000 or 10,000 acre hog farm. As former

Texas Agriculture Secretary Jim Hightower says: "Sometimes there's just too many pigs in the creek."

I have looked into the eyes of Tzotzil women in Chiapas Mexico, whose eyes are all that show. Women whose faces are covered in the tropics with ski masks because if the Mexican military or para-military see them they will be killed if they are known. I've seen the U.S. military-supplied armored personnel carriers on small dirt roads in Chiapas and recognized the absence of human rights and dignity that is central to NAFTA. And I also recognize the impact of \$250 million in U.S. military aid and trade to a country like Mexico -- a country with no known enemies. American foreign policy is reflective of American economic policy and at best, both presently and historically, it makes refugees. That is the major reason we have the challenge of immigration. I congratulate Paul Wellstone on his principled stand on NAFTA, Colin Peterson's opposition to NAFTA and ask one more time for Senator Rod Grams office to return my calls.

And while Dan Quayle could not spell potato I can. O-P-I-N-II-G. That's Ojibwe for potato. And that language is one of 187 endangered indigenous languages which do not benefit from English-only legislation.

As a human I understand these issues and as a woman, I ask why it is that I should be more concerned about the sugar content of breakfast cereal than the amount of mercury in my son's tissue from eating fish from Minnesota lakes.

In conclusion, until American domestic and foreign policy addresses quality of life issues for the poorest people in the country, we cannot say that there is quality of life. Until all of us are treated as peoples -- with full human rights -- we cannot tout a human rights record. Until policy decisions are made that do not benefit solely the 1 percent of the population which has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of the population, I do not think that we can collectively say that we are talking about real economic and social benefits. And finally, until we have an environmental, economic and social policy that is based on consideration of the impact on the seventh generation from now, we will still be living in a society that is based on conquest not one that is based on survival. I consider myself a patriot -- not to a flag -- to a land. And in that spirit I am pleased to join with other citizen activists, with Cam Gordon, with Lee Ann TallBear, with Ralph Nader and the Green Party to make this truly an inclusive and substantive dialogue on the future of this America.

Miigwetch, Mi'iw.