



U.S. Department of the Interior

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## Secretary Haaland Takes Equity and Inclusion to the Next Level at SXSW

Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland attended SXSW yesterday where she outlined *Auntie Deb's Guide to Equity & Inclusion*. Her remarks highlighted her philosophy about why representation matters, how to take it to the next level, and what can be possible when we recognize America's full history and provide space for all voices to have a seat at the table. Putting her words into action, Secretary Haaland invited writer, transgender activist and military veteran Charlotte Clymer to share the stage for a Q&A session following her speech.

Secretary Haaland's remarks follow a series of events and actions taken to underscore the Department's prioritization of equity and inclusion across the federal government, including [establishing](#) the first-ever Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Council; [visiting](#) historically significant sites that tell the stories of marginalized communities; and [advancing](#) efforts to remove derogatory names from our nation's public lands and waters.

### ***Remarks as prepared for delivery are below:***

Hello, everyone! I'm Deb Haaland, and I am happy to be here with all of you. It's great to be in Austin, Texas.

I serve as the 54th Secretary of the Interior. I'm a proud member of the Pueblo of Laguna in New Mexico. I was raised a military kid. I raised an amazing child as a single mom. I'm a wife, a sister, an auntie, and a public servant.

And... I'm not supposed to be here. What I mean by that is this country was built on principles and systems that were meant to either assimilate or exterminate people like me – to either make me blend into the background of America or get rid of me altogether.

But, against all odds, I am still here.

The reality — that I am standing here as a figure of success in spite of my history of tragedy and loss — is shared by many people in our country. We cannot deny that laws and policies in our not-too-distant past here in the United States were built on doctrines of enslavement, land grabbing, and discrimination.

In fact, in many states today including right here in Texas, there are still efforts to strip people of their dignity, discriminate against them because of their identities, and marginalize them. Quite frankly, it's disgusting.

This is why I believe representation matters. And why I think every single one of us has a role to play in taking the power of that representation to the next level.

Think about this: the United States Department of the Interior was once the federal agency tasked with the forced assimilation of Indigenous people. In fact, a leader in this country described that process as a way to, and I quote, "kill the Indian, save the man."

It's not lost on me that I lead a department with that history, and that, now, Indigenous people everywhere have representation at the presidential cabinet level. Today, we are in the room, at the table, and on the world stage.

But this should be the norm, right? Every person in this country deserves to see themselves in leadership.

When I was growing up, there weren't many women in elected office and even fewer Indigenous people. How was I to know that this was even possible?

Lack of representation sends a powerful message. It tells young people that these spaces aren't for them. It tells them that their lived experience isn't relevant. Or maybe that they don't deserve to have a chance to be at the decision-making table.

I will add that many adults subscribe to that thinking too.

During my first campaign when I ran for Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico, no one asked me to run. No one recruited me. It's likely because no one considered that an Indigenous woman could hold that seat or even put together a successful campaign, because they'd never seen it done before. And when our ticket lost, I'm sure there were a lot of people who thought I would never run again.

When I decided to run for Congress, I did what most candidates do. I called around to close friends, family, and people who would give me their honest opinions. My close friends were ready to help. But folks across the country said, it couldn't be done — that it would be impossible for a Native woman to raise enough money or win that type of election, especially given the fact that I was in a 6-way primary.

Well, I'm here to tell everyone at this event, and everyone joining online, that not only can it be done, but that it must be done.

Sometimes, we have to just take the plunge because no one's gonna ask people like me to lead — or at least it was that way for a very long time. But even if we fail, we make it just a little bit easier for the next person from a marginalized community who makes the effort after us.

Lack of representation hasn't just meant that communities haven't had a say in policies that impact their lives — which is awful enough. It also has tragic consequences that can be, as many of you know, life threatening.

Last year, a national report found Black children ages 5 to 19 are five-and-a-half times more likely to drown than white children. According to the USA Swimming Foundation, about 70 percent of Black children and 60 percent of Latino children don't know how to swim.

And why don't they know how to swim? It goes back to a history of exclusion:

From being barred from city and public pools. From a lack of access to beaches and open water. From the growing disparities between people who have the time and means to pay for

swimming lessons or water sports and those who do not. From growing up in communities where experiencing the outdoors has felt out of reach, because parents lack the resources for transportation or even admission costs.

There is an intergenerational trauma from this legacy of disparity that still leads to higher rates of drowning among certain communities.

I can't get those statistics out of my head. I can't stop thinking about how powerless I felt as a single parent, relying on public assistance and the grace and charity of others, to make sure my child was not left behind. Or worse, was not put in danger.

That's one of the realities that drives me in my work. It's one of the reasons we are doing everything we can to ensure kids have access to outdoor recreation, to rivers, to lakes, to mountains, and so much more regardless of their zip codes.

Yes, it will give communities a chance to benefit from the bounty of nature. But it also gives children the opportunity to learn about the land. To have access to our natural resources, to learn to respect and co-exist with our environment. I believe that the foundation we build now will help young people of today to become good stewards of our lands and waters, and hopefully keep more children safe.

All of this is informed by the effort to center equity and inclusion in our work. The challenges our country faces — climate change, a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, and racial inequity — can only be solved if marginalized communities have a voice, are respected, and are included in solutions.

Ok, so in Indigenous communities, pretty much everyone's an Auntie. Calling someone Auntie is a sign of respect and an acknowledgement that Aunties are there to teach us. We are all part of not only our own Pueblos, Nations, Tribes, or villages, but we are also part of our broader Indigenous family.

So, today — you are all my family. And I'm here as Auntie Deb. I'm here to share that knowledge. To go beyond what we know about equity and inclusion and representation. To empower each of you to be your own change-maker.

I mentioned earlier that we can't wait for someone to ask us to step up. We must be unafraid — we must be fierce and often we have to jump feet first into being the first at anything.

If we're lucky, there are times in history when someone from within the power structure truly understands the value of representation. When someone gives of their own power to lift up others who they know deserve to be heard.

President Biden — a white man born during the time of Jim Crow, Japanese internment, farmworker exploitation, and forced assimilation — made space for a cabinet that looks like America.

Marcia Fudge, a Black woman leading the Department of Housing and Urban Development; Miguel Cardona, a former teacher and the son of Puerto Rican parents leading the Department of Education; Michael Regan, Isabel Guzman, Lloyd Austin, Katherine Tai, Alejandro Mayorkas, and so many more; And to top it all off, Kamala Harris, the daughter of Indian and Jamaican immigrants, serving as our first woman Vice President.

We are the most diverse cabinet in the history of our country. But it's not just about us sitting in a chair in the Cabinet Room at the White House. It's about the conversations and solutions that result when people can bring their whole selves — their diverse experiences, perspectives and input — to the table, and where each of us listens and learns from these perspectives.

The government is responsible for serving communities that have been marginalized but has rarely benefited from the input and experiences of people who live in those communities.

Like many people of color, I come from a community that has dealt with the decisions of an Interior Department and a federal government that didn't appreciate or respect our history, our culture, or our autonomy. All of that has led to environmental injustice.

I know first-hand what it looks like to have a toxic, abandoned mine in my community. I've seen families struggle with the health impacts of that, and with the environmental degradation of what detonating dynamite every day for 30 years caused, while the largest open pit uranium mine in the world was made. The company then simply abandoned it when it was no longer cost effective, and it took decades to remedy.

There are stories of Black children with lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan because they have contaminated water, and Latino organizers in Southern California who went to school with tissues in their noses, because of nosebleeds from toxic air quality.

It's these stories that make me feel the importance of electing leaders who look more like them, because they will understand better what their communities go through, and they can be the change-makers who take action.

That's why representation matters. It's not just because of who leadership is, but what they do with the power they wield.

For too long, these issues have been brushed aside. The fact that not every community can get up and move every time there is a toxic spill, water treatment failures, or an environmental disaster is too often forgotten.

But let me tell you: the time for change is right now.

With the transformational Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in place, we're focusing on addressing legacy pollution in a way that acknowledges the full picture of environmental injustice. We're addressing lead pipes and clean drinking water, lack of broadband access, roads, bridges, and crumbling schools and infrastructure.

For many of us, the struggle for equal access to government resources and taxpayer investments is not new. It's why I truly believe that every person in this country should know our full history — our triumphs, our struggles, our progress, and where we have fallen short.

Because we will only change our future when we recognize what needs to be changed and when we say the words out loud.

Last month, I went to Mississippi to visit the home of Medgar and Myrlie Evers — the refrigerator in the family kitchen was one that I could remember seeing in my own family home when I was a kid. The children's twin beds reminded me of my and my siblings' beds. Then, I saw the bullet holes in the wall, and I could feel the horror of a family targeted in their own home just because they wanted to live in a world where the color of their skin didn't determine what restroom or school they could go to or whether or not they could vote.

When we're able to see how similar we are to each other, yet how differently we experience the world, we learn to appreciate the unique hardships people go through and understand that historical marginalization puts entire communities behind.

When I saw those bullet holes and listened to the Evers' daughter, Reena, recount her memories, it reminded me of the stories my grandma would share about being taken away from her home by a government-sanctioned Catholic boarding school, when she was only 8 years old.

It's a history that not many people know about in the United States — that young Indigenous children were stolen from their homes and taken to “schools” run by the federal government, sometimes by the Department of the Interior! Those schools had one purpose: to assimilate Indigenous children. They took their clothes, cut their long hair, and beat them when they spoke their traditional languages. As I mentioned: to kill the Indian in order to save the man.

It's a sad and traumatic part of my history. It is something that still haunts communities, from those who survived boarding schools to those who were raised by those survivors, often living every day with the horrors of that experience and passing on that trauma from generation to generation.

The term for that is “generational trauma” and it's real, but you don't just have to take my word for it. Far too many communities in our country experience generational trauma on a daily basis. I recently visited a former Japanese Internment camp, the survivors and their descendants described how that long term imprisonment impacted them when they went home, how their parents and grandparents were never the same and passed down that trauma.

It doesn't really ever get easier to talk about these periods in American history. But when we talk about them, we can help communities to heal.

It's why I launched the Federal Indian Boarding School initiative, to investigate the full scope of forced assimilation practices at those schools. To help Indigenous communities get answers and support resources so that they can continue to heal.

The question we have to consider is this: would someone who hasn't directly experienced this trauma move these issues forward? Would they know to prioritize the necessary healing in order to accomplish other goals? The answer is maybe.

But when leadership has those perspectives and can lead with empathy based on shared experiences, the answer to that question is definitely.

This is why representation matters.

President Biden has tasked every federal agency to use a lens of equity and inclusion in the work we do. To center the voices of those who have been marginalized or underrepresented.

It's much easier to ground our path toward equity and inclusion if there are leaders at the table who have those experiences. And just as lack of representation has an impact on how effective leadership is — the presence of representation opens the doors of opportunities for others to follow.

Not only do young people now see figures from their communities serving at the highest levels of government — the policies and solutions that are developed will break down the barriers that were meant to keep them out.

This is why representation matters.

This is also why one of my personal goals is to leave the ladder down behind me for more people to climb. And then, when they do climb that ladder, I will lift them up on my shoulders so that they can climb even higher. This is my responsibility because that's what my ancestors did for me.

I challenge everyone here to do the same. That's the key step to fully realizing equity and inclusion — it doesn't just stop with us. This process must outlive us.

So here it is, my South by Southwest family, Auntie Deb's guide to equity and inclusion:

First, for people who come from marginalized communities: **don't be afraid to be the first** and don't wait for someone to ask you. Step on to the stage and don't worry about failing, because just showing up is part of the work and it moves all of us another step forward. Shirley Chisom — one of my heroes — was the first Black woman to serve in Congress. What you may not know is that she also ran for President! She broke down barriers so that more women could run and eventually win.

Second, use any bit of power you have — and believe me anyone at any level, every single person here, has power — to **make room for diverse voices** that can take the lead. I mean, think about the room of people preparing for the Montgomery Bus Boycotts — everyone gathered, everyone had a role, everyone knew what was at stake, and everyone worked together as a team to decide together in the planning, and they executed that mission successfully.

It requires a great deal of humility to admit that you don't know everything and that someone's lived experiences can be just as valuable as a degree or a resume. But recognizing that will help build more equitable and inclusive solutions. And it will help ensure that more people who look like America are around the table to make the best decisions for America. Lift those people up!

Third, **learn our country's full history** — it's each of our obligation to go beyond what school curricula teaches us. Our full history is deep, and it will require us to ask questions that make us uncomfortable but will lead us to better understand people's lived experiences without judgment. Listen more than you talk. When you see a disparity — the communities fighting for clean drinking water, breathing in toxic fumes, keeping their children safe in the outdoors — stop and think about why that disparity exists. If you can't figure it out, don't stop there. Seek out ways to help shine a light on it. Do the work to dig into root causes and build solutions that have empathy.

Fourth, **be fierce**. This is long and hard work that requires passion and determination. Native American fishing rights activist, Billy Frank, fought for 30 years to make sure his people had the right to fish on their ancestral homelands. Your truths and your experiences are valuable — we can all benefit from sharing more of our whole selves.

And last, **leave the ladder down** for more people to climb. Human rights activist Dolores Huerta is still fighting for human rights — 60 years after she started. Even at 92, she's training the next generation of activists, helping women run for office, lifting people up on her shoulders so they can have a voice in our future.

There you have it -- tell everyone you know that Auntie Deb says that we all have a role in making sure that equity and inclusion are not just taglines or empty promises. Representation truly does matter.

So, step up, stand tall, and be fierce!

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