Elouise Cobell Posthumously Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Obama

Elouise Cobell was posthumously awarded the highest civilian award of the United States in the final Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony under President Obama’s presidency. Her son, Turk Cobell, accepted the medal on her behalf. Indian Gaming Magazine was honored to attend the White House ceremony and spoke with Turk about the monumental event, his mother’s work and her historical legacy.

What did accepting the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama on behalf of your mother, Elouise, mean to you?

It was with a tremendous amount of pride that I accepted the award on her behalf. The award confirmed what our family and close friends knew all along, which was that she was an extraordinary Native American woman that was extremely brave and courageous. We knew that our whole lives. The award was a culmination of all of the years of her courage and bravery. I was very proud. When I got the phone call, it was a ‘knock-you-off-your-feet’ moment. To have her recognized with the individuals on that stage really put things into perspective and emphasized how extraordinary she was and what she did. She was recognized accordingly with that group of people.

What would the award have meant to Elouise if she were here today?

My mother was the type of person that didn’t relish notoriety or recognition. She would have said ‘this is absolutely not necessary,’ but she would have relished the moment. She would have enjoyed the experience and been very grateful for it. At the same time, she would have said, ‘this is not necessary for me.’

What did you learn from her that you carry with you?

There are a lot of people out there that need help and assistance at various levels. If you can identify with and relate to people, it’s going to help not only you, but also everybody. She was very good at relating to and helping people from every walk of life. She knew what people needed and how to help them.

Financial literacy was a big deal in her life. When somebody told her early on that she wasn’t smart enough to understand accounting from the BIA, she mastered accounting. One thing I especially respected about her was her resolve and energy. She was non-stop and utterly relentless on things she knew to be right, or that needed changing or improving.

How did the settlement of Cobell v. Salazar impact Elouise?

The settlement was bittersweet. The talks started at, as you can imagine, a much larger number. The case primarily was for the federal government to produce an accounting of individual Indian trusts. Eventually, it was determined that they couldn’t produce an accounting because there was never one done. Experts came up with a settlement number once they started negotiations of well over $100 billion, which included interest. The plaintiff’s attorneys came to the conclusion that the federal government was never going to settle anything for $100 billion, so the 100 plus years of interest was taken off, which equated to approximately $20 billion. Interior and Treasury came back with a number that said, ‘we think we owe you zero.’ That’s where things started.
When the number of $3.4 billion was reached, it was my mother’s decision to accept. It was a very difficult decision because she knew the federal government owed more money. Everybody did. However, the case had been going on for 14 to 15 years and every year that went by, hundreds of individuals in the class were dying. By stretching it out another couple of years, a few hundred more people in the class would have died. That was primarily what made her decision – people were dying and they needed to receive some justice before they died.

It’s extremely ironic that she happened to be one of them. After the settlement was reached, unscrupulous attorneys filed an appeal and extended the case a couple more years. Her life was lost in that amount of time.

The components of the settlement are still playing out. A settlement is not perfect – the pure definition is you don’t get entirely what you’re looking for. However, hundreds of thousands of individual Native Americans received some sort of justice for the mismanagement of their individual lands. There are certain by-products that are going to be looked upon for years to come as wonderful pieces of that settlement, one of which is the Cobell Scholarship. Another is the attempt to drastically reduce the amount of fractionated Indian lands across reservations, which really hampered development on reservations with tribal governments. Those two components will be long lasting for years to come and are a wonderful legacy.

Can you speak about the scholarship fund that was created in her honor?

As a component of the settlement, the Cobell Scholarship was created and is a part of the land buy-back program. A portion of each one of the fractionated land sales done is transferred to the Cobell Scholarship Fund, now in its second academic year awarding scholarships. The response from Native American and Alaska Native students has been overwhelming. Indigenous Education has done a good job of administering the scholarship and there has been a tremendous response of applicants. It is one of the most important pieces of the settlement in that it will ensure my mother’s legacy lives on much longer than the other components of the settlement. It will touch so many more people into perpetuity, which is what it was meant to do.

How has the Obama Administration impacted Indian Country?

If you look at the body of work his Administration has done with Indian Country, it is more than any administration in terms of recognizing these wrongs and making them right, to some degree, through the courts and finalizing of settlements on all of these cases that have been out there for years. He engaged Indian Country more so than any president that I’ve known for a long time. If you were to ask that same question across Indian Country, I think you’d find the same response.

It doesn’t stop here. There is a lot of work to do and oversight needed. There is still a lot of fight that has to be maintained to ensure the rights of Native Americans and that the trust oversight by the federal government is appropriate. That will never stop, but the amount of work President Obama has done over these last eight years has been tremendous. The Obama Administration has meant a lot to Indian Country.

Elouise Cobell (1945-2011)

Elouise Pépion Cobell was a Blackfeet Tribal community leader and an advocate for Native American self-determination and financial independence. Born Elouise Pépion on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, she was the daughter of Polite and Catherine Pépion. She graduated from Great Falls Business College and attended Montana State University before becoming treasurer of the Blackfeet Nation, where she founded the first national bank on a tribal reservation, Blackfeet National Bank. Cobell won a MacArthur genius award in 1997 for this work and for her efforts supporting Native financial literacy. She went on to found the Native American Bank and served as director of the Native American Community Development Corporation, inspiring Native American women to seek leadership roles in their communities.

Cobell used her expertise in accounting to champion a lawsuit, Cobell v. Salazar, which resulted in a historic $3.4 billion settlement, restoring tribal homelands to her beloved Blackfeet Nation and many other tribes, and in so doing, inspired a new generation of Native Americans to fight for the rights of others. The landmark Cobell v. Salazar suit resulted in the largest ever settlement of a class action against the federal government. Part of the settlement funds went to partially compensate more than 500,000 Native Americans, as well as fund the buy back of fractionated lands to be restored to Native American tribes. As part of the settlement, the $60 million Cobell Education Scholarship Fund was also established in her honor.
“The Presidential Medal of Freedom is not just our nation’s highest civilian honor - it’s a tribute to the idea that all of us, no matter where we come from, have the opportunity to change this country for the better,” said President Obama.

The 21 distinguished honorees include...

**Kareem Abdul-Jabbar** is the National Basketball Association’s all-time leading scorer; a six-time NBA Most Valuable Player and a 19-time NBA All-Star. In addition, Abdul-Jabbar has been an outspoken advocate for social justice.

**Ellen DeGeneres** is an award-winning comedian who has hosted *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* since 2003 with her trademarked humor, humility, and optimism. She also hosted the Academy Awards twice. Ellen is a passionate advocate for equality and fairness.

**Robert De Niro** has brought to life some of the most memorable roles in American film during a career that spans five decades. He is a seven-time Academy Award nominee and two-time Oscar winner. He is also a Kennedy Center honoree.

**Richard Garwin** is a polymath physicist who made pioneering contributions to U.S. defense and intelligence technologies, low-temperature and nuclear physics, detection of gravitational radiation, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computer systems, laser printing, and nuclear arms control and nonproliferation. He directed Applied Research at IBM’s Thomas J. Watson Research Center and taught at the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and Harvard University. The author of 500 technical papers and a winner of the National Medal of Science, Garwin holds 47 U.S. patents, and has advised numerous administrations.

**Bill and Melinda Gates** established the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2000 to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, the foundation focuses on improving
people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the U.S., the mission is to ensure that all people – especially those with the fewest resources – have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. The Gates Foundation has provided more than $36 billion in grants since its inception.

**Frank Gehry** is one of the world’s leading architects, whose works have helped define contemporary architecture. His best-known buildings include the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the Dancing House in Prague, and the Guggenheim Museum building in Bilbao, Spain.

**Margaret H. Hamilton** led the team that created the on-board flight software for NASA’s Apollo command modules and lunar modules. A mathematician and computer scientist who started her own software company, Hamilton co-created the concepts of asynchronous software, priority scheduling, and human-in-the-loop decision capability.

**Tom Hanks** is one of the Nation’s finest actors and filmmakers. He has been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role five times, and received the award for his work in *Philadelphia and Forrest Gump*. Off screen, as an advocate, Hanks has advocated for social and environmental justice, and for veterans and their families.

**Grace Hopper** (posthumous award accepted by her grand-niece Deborah Murray). Rear Admiral Grace Hopper was at the forefront of computers and programming development from the 1940s through the 1980s. Hopper’s work helped make coding languages more practical and accessible, and she created the first compiler, which translates source code from one language into another.

**Michael Jordan** is one of the greatest athletes of all time. Jordan played 15 seasons in the NBA for the Chicago Bulls and Washington Wizards; he is currently a principal owner and chairman of the Charlotte Hornets. During his career, he won six championships, five Most Valuable Player awards, and appeared in 14 All-Star games.

**Maya Lin** is an artist and designer known for her work in sculpture and landscape art. She designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. and has pursued a celebrated career in both art and architecture. She is a committed environmentalist bringing awareness to the planet’s loss of habitat and biodiversity.

**Lorne Michaels** is a producer and screenwriter, best known for creating and producing *Saturday Night Live*, which has run continuously for more than 40 years. In addition, he produced *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and *30 Rock*. He has won 13 Emmy Awards over the course of his lengthy career.

**Newt Minow** is an attorney with a long and distinguished career in public life. After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Minow served as a Supreme Court clerk and counsel to the Governor of Illinois. In 1961,
President Kennedy selected Minow, then 34, to serve as Chairman of the Federal Communications Committee (FCC), where he helped shape the future of American television and was a vigorous advocate for broadcasting that promoted the public interest. In the five decades since leaving the FCC, Minow has maintained a prominent private law practice while devoting himself to numerous public and charitable causes.

**Eduardo Padrón** is President of Miami Dade College (MDC), one of the largest institutions of higher education in the United States. During his more than four decade career, President Padrón has been a national voice for access and inclusion. He has worked to ensure all students have access to high quality, affordable education. He has championed innovative teaching and learning strategies making MDC a national model of excellence.

**Diana Ross** has had an iconic career spanning more than 50 years within the entertainment industry in music, film, television, theater, and fashion. Diana Ross is an Academy Award nominee, inductee into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, recipient of the Grammy Awards highest honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award, and recipient of the 2007 Kennedy Center Honors.

**Vin Scully** is a broadcaster who, for 67 seasons, was the voice of the Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers. In Southern California, where generations of fans have grown up listening to Dodger baseball, Scully’s voice is known as the “soundtrack to summer.” In 1988, he was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. His signature voice brought to life key moments in baseball history.

**Bruce Springsteen** is a singer, songwriter, and bandleader. The stories he has told, in lyrics and epic live concert performances, have helped shape American music. Springsteen is a Kennedy Center honoree and he and the E Street Band he leads have each been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

**Cicely Tyson** has performed on the stage, on television, and on the silver screen. She has won two Emmy Awards and a Tony Award, and is known for her performances in *Sounder*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and *The Help*. In 2013, she returned to the stage with *The Trip to the Bountiful*, and was awarded the Tony Award for best leading actress. Tyson received the Kennedy Center Honors in 2015. ♠