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Statement from Director Kevin Gover on Billy Frank, Jr. Receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom

In 1979, Billy Frank, Jr. won perhaps the greatest legal victory for American Indian Nations during the 20th Century—United States v. Washington, famously known as the “Boldt decision.” The Supreme Court decision re-affirmed the validity of treaties between the United States and American Indian Nations and enforced Indian rights to fish free of state regulation, rights that had been trampled for a century. Billy Frank, Jr. was the driver of the movement to assert treaty rights. <http://content.yudu.com/A30ayl/nmai-summerfall-2014/resources/15.htm>

Yesterday, President Barack Obama announced that Billy will receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the Nation’s highest civilian honor, presented to individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.

The President stated: “Billy Frank, Jr. was a tireless advocate for Indian treaty rights and environmental stewardship, whose activism paved the way for the ‘Boldt decision,’ which reaffirmed tribal co-management of salmon resources in the state of Washington. Frank led effective ‘fish-ins,’ which were modeled after sit-ins of the civil rights movement, during the tribal ‘fish wars’ of the 1960s and 1970s. His magnetic personality and tireless advocacy over more than five decades made him a revered figure both domestically and abroad. . . . Frank left in his wake an Indian Country strengthened by greater sovereignty and a nation fortified by his example of service to one’s community, his humility, and his dedication to the principles of human rights and environmental sustainability.”

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/president-obama-names-recipients-presidential-medal-freedom>

Like my friends and colleagues, I am sad that Billy is not alive to receive this honor. Billy was a friend, and in the last years of his life was a member of the NMAI's Circle of Elders. But we are also joyously grateful that Billy lived. As much as anyone in the modern era, Billy helped reverse the course of history in favor of American Indian Treaty rights and Indian Tribal sovereignty. In so doing, he helped to restore America's dignity and its commitment to the rule of law in its policies towards the first Americans. Billy believed deeply that great nations keep their word, and showed us all how to fight for what we believe.

Kevin Gover (Pawnee)

Director, National Museum of the American Indian

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