

Deb Haaland Confronts the History of the Federal Agency She Leads

As the first Native American Cabinet member, the Secretary of the Interior has made it part of her job to address the travesties of the past.

By Casey Cep

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“When I think about why I am really here,” Haaland says, “it’s like I’m here because the ancestors felt it was necessary.” Photograph by The Tyler Twins for The New Yorker

When they would not let their children be taken, they were taken instead. A hundred and thirty years ago, nineteen men from the Third Mesa of the Hopi Reservation, in Arizona, were arrested for refusing to surrender their sons and daughters to soldiers who came for them armed with Hotchkiss guns. For years, the United States had been trying to make the Hopi send their children to federal boarding schools—the children sometimes as young as four, the schools sometimes a thousand miles away. The intent and the effect of those boarding schools was forced assimilation: once there, students were stripped of their Native names, clothing, and language and made to adopt Christian names, learn English, and abandon their traditional religion and culture.

Hopi parents had tried placating the authorities, saying they would enroll their children soon, then hiding them whenever the soldiers returned. Indian agents, meanwhile, had tried withholding food and water from Hopi families to force their compliance; when that failed, they turned to physical force instead, sending soldiers onto tribal lands to round up all the school-age children. But some parents continued to resist, and, in the fall of 1894, the U.S. Army made the arrests. The nineteen men, who were from Orayvi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America, were marched, with their hands bound, a hundred and fifty miles to Fort Wingate, in New Mexico, then transported by horse, train, and ferry to California, where they were imprisoned for nearly a year on Alcatraz Island. In a letter to the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs recommended holding “those Indian prisoners in confinement at hard labor until such time as in the opinion of the said military authorities who might be in charge of them, they should show beyond a doubt, that they fully realized the error of their evil ways and evinced in an unmistakable manner their determination to cease interference with the plans of the government for the civilization and education of its Indian wards.”

The Hopi were not alone. After annihilation and dispossession failed, the effort to “Americanize” Indians through the federal boarding-school system targeted every tribe in the country—a vast family-separation policy that deliberately deracinated generations of children. As one Indian school superintendent wrote in a report, “Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated.” From 1819 to 1969, the United States took hundreds of thousands of children away from their parents, sending them to four hundred and eight schools across thirty-seven states. By 1926, more than eighty per cent of school-age Indian children had been removed from their families.

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The schools where those children studied were marked, from their founding, by reports of disease, physical abuse, sexual violence, and financial exploitation, as students were forced to work for neighboring farmers, homesteaders, and businesses. At least five hundred children died while attending the schools, and at least fifty-three of the schools have burial sites, filled with the bodies of children who were never returned to their families. An extensive network of religious institutions also participated in these travesties: the Catholic Church operated more than a hundred Indian boarding schools; dozens of others were run by the Society of Friends, the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Unitarian Church, and the Episcopal Church. The founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Pennsylvania, one of the earliest federal institutions, told a conference of social reformers, “All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

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The boarding-school system affected virtually every Indian family in the country, including that of Deb Haaland, the fifty-fourth Secretary of the

Interior and the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary. Haaland's grandmother Helen was eight years old when a priest from Mission San José de Laguna, in New Mexico, gathered children in the village of Mesita, some fifty miles west of Albuquerque, and put them on a train to Santa Fe, more than a hundred miles away. In the five years that Helen spent at St. Catherine's Industrial Indian School, a family member was able to visit her only twice—her father, who worked as both a farmer and a tribal policeman, left his fields and flocks, loaded up his horse and wagon, then rode for three days each way to check on his young daughter.



"Rob, this is not the time to show off your chin-ups."

Cartoon by Joe Dator

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Haaland grew up hearing about St. Catherine’s not only from her grandmother but also from her mother, who was sent there as well. Each generation had stories of hardship and separation. Now Haaland has made listening to similar stories a central part of her job. In the summer of 2021, just months after being sworn in as Secretary of the Interior, she launched the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to investigate the schools—at the time, there was not so much as a comprehensive list of them, let alone a full roster of students—and to consult with tribes about how to make amends for the harm that the schools caused. After releasing an initial report, in 2022, Haaland decided that archival research and internal investigations were not enough, and began convening listening sessions in Native communities around the country so that survivors and descendants could share testimony. Each session opened with Haaland acknowledging a bitter irony: “My ancestors endured the horrors of the Indian boarding-school assimilation policies carried out by the same department that I now lead.”

Most Americans, if they think about the Department of the Interior at all, likely think first of its natural-resource agencies: the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But, to Haaland and the nearly four million other Native Americans in this country, it is best known for the Bureau of Indian Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration, which handles the billions of dollars the federal government holds in trust for tribes, a financial arrangement dating back to some of the earliest negotiations of the Committee on Indian Affairs, led by Benjamin Franklin during the Continental Congress. In 1849, when Interior was founded, it took over management of those treaty and trust obligations, and it still manages the nation-to-nation relationships

between the United States and its five hundred and seventy-four federally recognized tribes.

In the long, tragic saga of this country's relations with its first peoples, almost no federal entity has been more culpable than Interior. Just fifteen years before Haaland's nomination, a federal judge, who had been appointed by Ronald Reagan, called the department "the morally and culturally oblivious hand-me-down of a disgracefully racist and imperialist government that should have been buried a century ago," denouncing it as "the last pathetic outpost of the indifference and anglocentrism we thought we had left behind." In taking over the department, Haaland, like all her predecessors, was tasked with overseeing one of the most diverse and unruly agencies in the federal government, so sprawling that it is sometimes called the Department of Everything Else. She has also embraced a possibly impossible challenge: not only running the Department of the Interior but redeeming it.

By her own count, Haaland is a thirty-fifth generation New Mexican. Her Laguna ancestors came south into the Rio Grande Valley in the late thirteenth century, settling along the shale and sandstone mesas of the North San Mateo Mountains, at the tail end of the Colorado Plateau. "You know, when I think about why I am really here," she told me recently, "it's like I'm here because the ancestors felt it was necessary. I can't explain it any other way."

"Here" means, among other things, her office, where we are sitting and talking one rainy winter afternoon. The office is enormous: an oak mansion inside the main Interior building, Federal Public Works Project No. 4, a seven-story limestone behemoth constructed in 1936. It takes up two city blocks just a few hundred feet from the White House, its prodigiousness and proximity the result of the politicking and savvy of Harold Ickes, the head of Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ickes not only got himself the largest office of any Cabinet secretary but also got the building more than three dozen New Deal-era murals, the first radio studio in any government agency, an entire museum on the first floor,

and air-conditioning. He even finagled an address to honor his department's founding: 1849 C Street.

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Haaland, affable and unassuming, still seems surprised to find herself occupying the office that Ickes built. But, in ways both obvious and subtle, she has made it her own. Paintings, photographs, sculptures, and handicrafts that Haaland chose from the collections of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Interior Museum fill the otherwise austere room like sunlight. “Pretty much every artist in here is Native American,” she said. After brewing tea in the sticker-covered travel mug she takes everywhere, and making sure for the second time that I didn’t want any myself, she settled us into a sitting area near the fireplace and began telling me about her family.



The four Haaland children—from left, Zoe, Judd, Deb, and Denise—with their father, John. Photograph courtesy Deb Haaland

Haaland's maternal grandparents, Helen and Antonio Toya, were from nearby pueblos but met at St. Catherine's Industrial Indian School. They were married in 1924 and moved into a railroad boxcar in Winslow, Arizona, where the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad was offering Laguna Indians employment in exchange for the miles of track it had laid on their land. Antonio went to work as a boxcar painter and then as a mechanic, and Helen became part of a female crew that cleaned diesel engines during the Second World War. Like many Laguna, the family briefly left their boxcar for a home that was previously occupied by Japanese railroad workers who were sent away to internment camps, some of which were established on reservations.

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The Toyas had four children. Their youngest daughter, Mary, Haaland's mother, was a tomboy who kept score for the Winslow Redskins, a baseball team her father started. (He kept the team going for long

enough that Haaland remembers fetching foul balls for a nickel apiece as a kid.) After finishing high school, in 1954, Mary spent two years at Arizona State College, before following her older brothers into the military, enlisting in the U.S. Naval Reserve. While stationed at Treasure Island, in San Francisco Bay, she met John David Haaland, the grandson of Norwegian immigrants, who grew up on a farm in the Upper Midwest. To an outsider, what's striking is the chasm between the couple's two cultures, but Haaland finds her way to the bridge: "He was from Minnesota and she was from Winslow—just rural, small-town people who got together and realized they had something in common."

Mary and John were married in 1958, and the third of their four children, Debra Anne, was born in 1960, while her father was stationed in Okinawa. He went on to earn two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star in Vietnam. During his deployments and temporary duty assignments, Haaland's mother would bring the children back to her parents—at first to a house in Arizona, but soon to her mother's ancestral homeland, in Mesita, where they all lived together in a one-room stone dwelling. That house, which is smaller than the office where Haaland and I were talking, is one of the few places she has ever thought of as home. Throughout her extremely peripatetic childhood—she attended thirteen public schools in as many years—she spent summers and other long spells getting a different kind of education from her grandmother on the Pueblo of Laguna. She and her siblings helped chop firewood, bake bread in a mud oven, cook huge pots of beef posole and deer stew, and pluck worms from the stalks of corn in the fields during the summertime. Whatever the season, they bathed in a galvanized washtub with water they heated on the stove after carrying buckets from the only well in the village, and they sometimes slept together on the floor. Before bedtime, their mother would do last call for the outhouse. Once they were ready for bed, their grandmother would turn out the only light in the house.

When Haaland was fourteen, her family moved to Albuquerque, where her mother went to work as a secretary for the Bureau of Indian Affairs,

and the children graduated one by one from Highland High School. Haaland had been academically gifted, but upon finishing school, in 1978, she'd barely given a thought to what to do next. She went to work full time at a local bakery where she'd been picking up shifts, for less than two dollars an hour. Most accounts of Haaland's life leave out the sometimes difficult, self-destructive years that followed. She tried the patience of the couple who owned the bakery by showing up late or not at all; she moved to Los Angeles, then abruptly returned; she developed a drinking problem that resulted in two D.U.I.s. She watched as her friends went away to college and her siblings found their way in the world. Her sister Zoe got a nursing degree. Her brother, Judd, started his own construction business. Her sister Denise got married and began a family.



“I need, like, a million little sticks.”

Cartoon by Tyson Cole

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“With my dad’s career, the way I was raised, you picked up and moved every couple of years,” Haaland told me. But in her twenties that motion turned to mere drift; like a lot of working people, she mostly got by. “You just put one foot in front of the other,” she said. She got married, a relationship that would not last, and watched as her parents’ marriage fell apart. Things changed one day when she was twenty-eight and putting on a hairnet in the bathroom at the bakery. “It was probably six in the morning,” she told me. “And I looked in the mirror, and I was, like, ‘Am I going to be doing this for the rest of my life?’ ” Hours later, on her lunch break, she called her older sister Denise, crying, to ask for help filling out a college application.

More than sixty thousand people work for Interior, nearly nineteen thousand of them in the National Park Service alone. The agency manages more than twenty per cent of this nation’s land—all told, more than half a billion acres, plus two and a half billion that are submerged beneath the oceans on the outer continental shelves. Sally Jewell, the Interior Secretary during Barack Obama’s second term, told me that running the department was “like studying for a final every night.” Some of the pressures are external. “There were thirty-five hundred lawsuits with my name on them,” Jewell said. But many are internal. The agency has eleven bureaus, which have widely different and sometimes dissonant mandates, leading to what Jewell called “massive conflicts within your own agency.” By way of example, she cited a clash over the Klamath River involving the Bureau of Reclamation, which managed a dam at the river’s headwaters; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which monitored the Chinook-salmon population; and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which was attempting to uphold its trust and treaty obligations with tribes including the Klamath, the Yurok, and the Karuk. Jewell

initiated the removal of four other dams on the river, one of the biggest water-restoration efforts in American history. “We finally got that over the finish line,” she said. “But definitely it can feel like losing a battle to win a war.”

Jewell was succeeded by President Donald Trump’s first Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, who reported for duty by riding down the National Mall on a horse named Tonto, installed a taxidermied grizzly bear in his office and the arcade game Big Buck Hunter in the cafeteria, and then set about selling the mining rights to threatened-species habitats, overturning a coal-lease moratorium, and shrinking national monuments. Trump’s second Interior Secretary, David Bernhardt, was a former agribusiness and oil-industry lobbyist who hollowed out the Bureau of Land Management by moving its headquarters from Washington, D.C., to his home state, Colorado.

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There was no question that change would come to Interior if Joe Biden defeated Trump, but no one knew how dramatic that transformation would be. The New Mexico senators Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall were reportedly among the leading candidates for the job. Both are Biden allies, and the latter is the son of the storied Interior Secretary Stewart L. Udall, for whom the department’s main building is now named. The elder Udall was nominated by John F. Kennedy, and, during his eight-year term, he fought for the passage of some of the most significant environmental legislation of the twentieth century, including the Wilderness Act and the Clean Air Act.

When Biden was elected, Haaland was serving her first term in Congress, representing New Mexico’s First District. She had endorsed Elizabeth Warren during the Democratic primary. She might never have been seriously considered for Interior were it not for activists such as the writer Julian Brave NoiseCat. In the summer of 2020, NoiseCat—who would later earn accolades for “Sugarcane,” his documentary about the abuse and disappearance of Native children from St. Joseph’s Mission Residential School, in Canada—was working for a left-wing think tank,

which asked him to put together a list of potential progressive Cabinet nominees should Biden win. “This was a pie-in-the-sky list,” NoiseCat told me. He had come to know Haaland during her congressional campaign, and knew she supported the Green New Deal and opposed drilling and fracking on federal lands. “I put Deb’s name on for Interior, and we joked it was like choosing the Lorax to be E.P.A. administrator,” NoiseCat said.

To his surprise, “Deb for Interior” took off. After Biden won, environmental groups, progressive PACs, and Native nonprofits mounted social-media campaigns and organized petitions to push elected officials to support her nomination. Meanwhile, Biden’s transition team was managing factions within the Party, trying to balance the ethnicity, gender, and geography of all fifteen Cabinet appointees to assemble a leadership team that the President pledged would “reflect the country they aim to serve.” In early December, word leaked that Michelle Lujan Grisham, the governor of New Mexico, had been offered the Interior job but turned it down. Not long afterward, an article appeared in *The Hill* claiming that Udall had been chosen; it was quickly taken down, and NoiseCat, realizing that Haaland might still have a chance, ghostwrote a public letter on behalf of progressive groups, asking the senator to remove himself from consideration. The letter contained a line that may have sealed Udall’s fate and Haaland’s future: “It would not be right for two Udalls to lead the Department of the Interior, the agency tasked with managing the nation’s public lands, natural resources and trust responsibilities to tribes, before a single Native American.” Biden selected Haaland a week later.

If Haaland’s rise seemed sudden to outsiders—from a freshman member of Congress to a Cabinet secretary in less than three years—to Native observers it was decades in the making, the result of a steady marshalling of forces that Haaland had not only benefitted from but had helped shape. Although Natives constitute less than three per cent of the American population, they are a potent voting bloc in some states: more than ten per cent of New Mexicans, roughly thirteen per cent of

Oklahomans, some twenty per cent of Alaskans. Native issues have always been bipartisan—too far under the radar, for most Americans, to have become particularly polarizing—and, historically, Native voters have not been strongly aligned with either party.

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But in the past two decades a handful of key races have come down to Native voters. Such voters helped Senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, win her 2010 write-in campaign; reelected Senator Jon Tester, of Montana, in 2018; and pushed Joe Biden over the top in Arizona in 2020. Increased wealth from the gaming industry has also fuelled tribal political power. In 1988, Indian casinos took in a hundred million dollars, mostly from bingo halls; in 2022, they took in nearly forty-one billion, from more than five hundred gaming operations in twenty-nine states. Flush with money to pay for lobbyists and to fund campaigns, Indigenous people began fielding more candidates than ever, and both parties started belatedly, and often awkwardly, targeting Native voters.

This year is the centenary of Native American enfranchisement. Native people did not get the right to vote until 1924, with the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, and those living on reservations in New Mexico were not allowed to vote until 1948. Even after that, the same voter-suppression techniques that existed in the Jim Crow South, from literacy tests to poll taxes, kept generations of Natives away from the ballot box. One of Haaland's personal heroes is Miguel Trujillo, a marine from Isleta Pueblo who returned home from the Second World War and sued for his right to vote. She often told his story in the early days of her political activism, when she would take pots of homemade chile to pueblo recreational halls and encourage Natives to register.

Soon, she was telling those voters her own story, too. In 1988, Haaland, then twenty-eight and newly sober, enrolled in college at the University of New Mexico. Not long afterward, the Muscogee poet Joy Harjo joined the faculty. "She came in carrying a motorcycle helmet, asking if she could get into my three-hundred-level creative-writing class," Harjo told me, recalling their first meeting. "I asked her about the helmet and

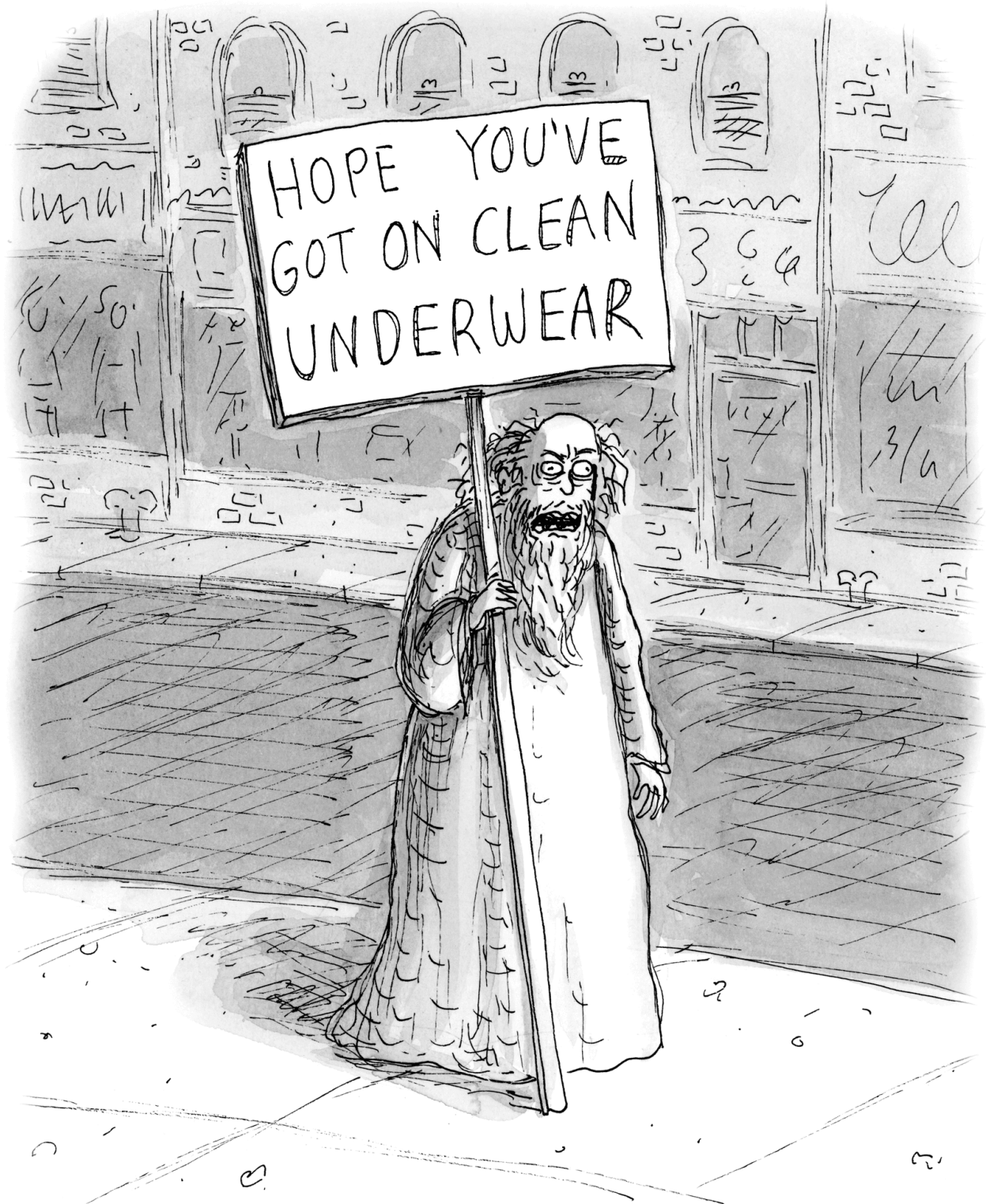
the motorcycle, and she said it saved fossil fuels.” Haaland was an English major, and Harjo became a mentor, hiring her as a research assistant, taking her to conferences for Indigenous writers, and cheering as she published fiction and poetry. “She wasn’t actively political then, but she was dedicated,” Harjo said. “She was dedicated to her studies, and she was dedicated to a set of ideals that involved care of the land, care of the earth, care of people.”

While working to pay for school, Haaland was also working to forge an identity that reconciled and honored her roots. Her father’s grandfather had arrived in America the same year that her mother’s grandfather had been sent away to boarding school, and she was acutely conscious of being both immigrant and Indigenous, Norwegian and Native. She visited her grandmother in Mesita most weekends, and she wrote many of her papers about family history. When she finished her degree, in six years, she was nine months pregnant; four days after graduation, she had the baby, whom she named Somah. She swapped the motorcycle for a minivan, wrote “COLUMBUS WAS LOST” on the back in shoe polish, and began looking for work. She turned some of her college essays into freelance articles for *New Mexico Magazine*, and cobbled together other income by catering and cooking. When Somah was two, Haaland started her own business: Pueblo Food Specialties. “She had this delicious chile recipe she used to make for everybody,” her sister Denise told me. “And she just said, ‘I’m going to start canning and selling it.’ She would take Somah with her, and they’d take it to grocery stores.”

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The business wasn’t always enough, though, especially when Haaland tried going back to school, first to begin a graduate degree in American Indian studies at U.C.L.A. and then, after her grandmother got sick and she returned home, a law degree at the University of New Mexico. Haaland went on food stamps, and found a preschool that was a co-op, where she could clean instead of paying tuition. She could afford only rooms in shared apartments, and when she couldn’t make the rent she and Somah would stay with family or sleep on the couches of accommodating friends. “The majority of my formative years were spent

living as a guest in other people's spaces," Somah, now a twenty-nine-year-old progressive activist, has written. "We got our own little place in Albuquerque halfway through my junior year, and my mom wanted me to have the one bedroom while she slept in a small room with no doors next to the kitchen."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

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Like many mothers, Haaland did some of her earliest organizing on behalf of her child. She went door-to-door in Santa Monica to preserve funding for a community theatre where Somah was enrolled in after-school classes. She rallied graduate students to persuade a dean to start classes later so that parents could drop off their children at school beforehand. When U.N.M. informed Haaland that she would be charged out-of-state tuition, she fought for a law redefining “resident student” to include any enrolled tribal member from the state. In 2006, Haaland failed the bar exam by five points. She decided that, rather than sit for it again, she would throw herself into politics—not only local campaigns but statewide Native organizing. Armed with a law degree, she began earning enough to support her family, first as a counsellor at a facility for adults with developmental delays, then as a tribal administrator and a casino manager for San Felipe Pueblo, and eventually as the first female director of the Laguna Development Corporation, which operates all the restaurants, hotels, and casinos owned by the tribe.

Haaland likes to say that no one ever asked her to run for office. In 2014, when Susana Martinez, a popular Republican and the nation’s first Latina governor, was up for reelection in New Mexico, few Democrats wanted to mount an underdog campaign for governor, much less lieutenant governor. Haaland launched a bid for the latter. “I just said, ‘Well, somebody has to do it,’ ” Haaland told me. She put more than a thousand miles on her Honda Civic each week, making the rounds of all thirty-three counties in the state. The Democrats not only lost the race for governor and lieutenant governor, they lost control of the state House of Representatives for the first time in sixty years. Yet Haaland saw a path to future victory, which she believed began with reforming the state Democratic Party, at the time demoralized and deeply in the red.

She was elected Party chair, and began aggressively fund-raising to pay down its debt. She devoted much of her two-year term to recruiting and

training new volunteers while also attending to longtime ones whose work she felt had been taken for granted. She hoped to lift up locals instead of allowing national campaigns to parachute in with operatives from other states. “She believes in showing up everywhere,” Trish Ruiz, a high-school guidance counsellor and a Democratic volunteer in one of the state’s most conservative counties, told me. Ruiz met Haaland at a back-yard political event. “I’m a bilateral amputee and I’m in a wheelchair, so getting into the back yard was a challenge, and my husband was there trying to help me figure out how to get in, and there was this whole group of people, but Deb noticed first,” Ruiz said. Haaland, she told me, came up and asked, “What can I do to help you?” Under Haaland’s leadership, the Democrats took back the state House and helped Hillary Clinton carry New Mexico in 2016.

In the nineteen-fifties, the federal government, in its attempt to forcibly assimilate Native Americans, adopted policies of “termination,” whereby the United States ceased to recognize certain tribes, taking jurisdiction over the land that belonged to them, and offering people who lived on reservations one-way bus or train fare to Los Angeles, Chicago, or Denver. The policy was largely carried out by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The end of termination, and of the federal Indian boarding-school policy, came about only because of a rise in Native activism, an extension of the civil-rights movement in which Indigenous people around the country staged dramatic protests for equality. In 1969, a group called Indians of All Tribes descended on Alcatraz Island—where the nineteen Hopi men had been imprisoned for refusing to give up their children—and stayed for a year and a half, demanding tribal sovereignty. In 1970, on the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth Rock, the American Indian Movement, a grassroots group founded in Minneapolis, seized a replica of the Mayflower near Boston and called for Thanksgiving to be observed as a national day of mourning. A year later, AIM occupied Mt. Rushmore to protest the theft of the Black Hills from the Sioux Nation;

in 1972, it organized the Trail of Broken Treaties, bringing caravans of protesters to Washington, where they occupied the Department of the Interior for a week.

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Three years later, Congress finally responded with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, and the Nixon Administration took steps to better honor the U.S.'s trust and treaty obligations, officially abandoning termination in favor of self-determination. Although Indian boarding schools continued to operate—and some still do today—many were taken over by the tribes.

In 2016, as Haaland was helping Democrats flip the New Mexico House, a new wave of Native activists was gathering in camps in North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, to block the Dakota Access Pipeline, a twelve-hundred-mile project for transporting hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil every day from the Bakken oil fields in the state's northwest corner all the way into Illinois. A few water protectors had first assembled near the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers, asserting their rights under the Fort Laramie Treaty to protect tribal land and drinking water. Soon, protesters from some two hundred tribes had arrived, not only founding members of the American Indian Movement but teen-agers and even younger children.

Haaland went to Standing Rock for four days, staying in the camps and preparing chile and tortillas for the water protectors. When she returned to New Mexico, she persuaded Party leaders in her state to divest from Wells Fargo, which was financing the pipeline. A year later, she called her sister Denise to say that she was running for Congress. "I never even thought I'd meet a congresswoman," Denise told me, laughing. "Nothing scares her," she added. "That's what I've always admired about my little sister."

In the primary, Haaland defeated five other Democrats, running an unapologetically progressive campaign in what had become a very liberal district. Like thousands of other women who ran for office that

year, she positioned herself as an antagonist of the Trump Administration, comparing the family-separation policy at the country's southern border to what had happened to her own family with the boarding schools. "It was shameful and inhumane then to separate families, and it's shameful and inhumane now," she said. She covered the First District in "Deb" yard signs with Zia sun symbols, and used the slogan "Be fierce." Her interpersonal style, though, was notably understated. "They didn't think she could win, because she's so quiet," Clara Apodaca, a former First Lady of New Mexico, told me, of early Haaland skeptics in the state. "She never seems to fight, but she always wins."

When campaigning, Haaland appealed to voters with stories about the hardships that had defined her life. She talked about being in recovery and how difficult it was to be a single mother; she invoked the overdraft fees that drained her checking account and the shame of having to return food to grocery-store shelves after discovering in the checkout line that she didn't have enough money to pay for it. Although Haaland is most consistently positioned as Native American, she identifies just as strongly as working class. Those identities often overlap: more than one in four Native Americans live below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate on some reservations is higher than fifty per cent. When Haaland was elected, she became one of the poorest members of Congress—she owned no home, had no savings account or investments of any kind, and was paying down tens of thousands of dollars in student loans.

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Haaland also became one of the first two Native women ever elected to Congress, along with Sharice Davids, a Ho-Chunk woman who flipped Kansas's Third Congressional District during that same election cycle. After their swearing-in, to which Haaland wore her traditional Pueblo clothes, more than thirty tribes and Indigenous organizations sponsored a joint celebration at a Washington hotel, where a Ho-Chunk drumming group nearly drowned out Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who was delivering remarks in the ballroom next door.



maslin

"Why is there a customer-service associate standing by to assist us?"

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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Pelosi, in an e-mail, praised Haaland's "immense empathy and invaluable experience" in addition to her skills as a manager and an administrator, noting how quickly she became the chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, a rare feat in a first term. Haaland co-sponsored more bills than any other freshman in Congress, and compiled one of the most liberal voting records. But she also earned a reputation as a pragmatic legislator with an unusually self-effacing approach, ushering three bills into law. Tom Cole, a Republican from Oklahoma and a member of the Chickasaw Nation, told me that he and Haaland have next to nothing in common politically (he describes the Green New Deal as "socialism masking as environmentalism") but that she reminds him of his mother, a pioneering Indigenous politician. "Deb's a force of nature," he said. "A very excellent legislator—innovative, active, instinctively bipartisan, although certainly very progressive."

Haaland's friendships across the aisle were critical after Biden nominated her. She was introduced at her confirmation hearing by the Alaska representative Don Young, at the time the longest-serving Republican in the House, who had strong ties to the Native community in his state. Haaland opened her own testimony with a greeting in Keres and acknowledged that Congress was in session "on the ancestral homelands of the Nacotchtank, Anacostan, and Piscataway people." A grilling followed, with Republicans on the committee attacking her opposition to fossil fuels and her support for conservation. Senator John Kennedy, of Louisiana, denounced Haaland as "a neo-socialist, left-of-Lenin wack job." (He later apologized for saying "wack job" instead of "extremist.") Her confirmation passed by a single vote—a surprising yes from Senator Murkowski, well known for her support of the fossil-fuel industry, but less well known as an adopted Tlingit, an honorary member of one of Alaska's two hundred and twenty-nine federally recognized tribes. The night before, work by the Apache and Chichimeca artist Mer

Young had been projected onto the main entrance of the Udall Building beside the words “Our Ancestors’ Dreams Come True.”

Any head of an executive agency needs time to settle in, but Haaland took longer than some, trying to resolve the conflict that her staff framed as “Deb vs. the Secretary.” She was struggling to maintain her personal identity within a bureaucratic framework and a political context that had historically been at odds with it. “Consider the fact that a former Secretary of the Interior once proclaimed it his goal to, quote, ‘civilize or exterminate’ us,” she said after her nomination, adding, “I’m a living testament to the failure of that horrific ideology.” She was also trying to scale up her leadership style. The kinds of teams that “Deb” had previously led were hundreds of times smaller than the one that “the Secretary” needed to manage. Three chiefs of staff shuffled through the agency in her first year. Accustomed to baking cakes for staffers’ birthdays and celebrating their every achievement, she had to settle for recognizing a single “Rockstar of the Week” so that meetings didn’t drag on.

The Biden Administration’s approach to Interior is largely in keeping with Haaland’s own political compass. She has been an integral player in a conservation plan pushed by Biden, called “30 by 30”—an attempt to conserve thirty per cent of the country’s land and water by 2030. This has included restoring protections for hundreds of thousands of acres that Trump slashed from two national monuments, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, lands dotted with tens of thousands of sacred and significant sites for, among others, the Hopi tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Ute tribes, and Haaland’s own Laguna Pueblo people. Haaland inevitably faced criticism from the right as she tried to move the country away from its focus on extractive industries. Her reception on the left whiplashed between fawning memes of “Auntie Deb” and insinuations that she was a token appointee lacking real power.

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In March of last year, in what was arguably her most public failure, Haaland announced that the Willow Project, an eight-billion-dollar oil-

drilling venture on the North Slope of Alaska, would be moving forward. Appearing in what some supporters called a hostage video, she said, “President Biden and I believe that the climate crisis is the most urgent issue of our lifetime,” before going on to explain that the project was “a difficult and complex issue that was inherited” from previous administrations. Haaland—who did not sign the record of decision approving the project, leaving the task to one of her deputies—tried to emphasize how legally constrained her decision-making was, and how much the project had been scaled back from what the energy company running it, ConocoPhillips, had first proposed. What she did not say was that the Biden Administration had determined that a legal fight over retracting the approved drilling leases would have been costly and likely futile. Nonetheless, many of the environmental and Indigenous groups that had worked to get Haaland appointed were unsparing in their criticism. “They use people of color for cover on these decisions,” the Bdeewakantunwan and Diné actor and activist Dallas Goldtooth told the press.

Tribes were divided over Willow, with some fighting for the preservation of the entire western Arctic and others applauding the thousands of jobs and billions in revenue that the project promised. No two tribes are alike, and tribal politics are complex. Last summer, when Haaland went to the Chaco Culture National Historical Park to celebrate the implementation of a twenty-year ban on new oil and gas leases around the World Heritage site, members of the Navajo Nation blocked the road to the park, preventing Haaland and anyone else from entering. Activists held signs saying “No Trespassing,” “VOTE These Tyrants OUT,” and “Go Home.” Some of the protesters were allotment owners, worried that their leasing rights would be curtailed by the ten-mile buffer zone around the site; others alleged that Haaland had a conflict of interest, since Somah Haaland works for the Pueblo Action Alliance, which had lobbied for the protections. House Republicans launched an ethics investigation into the Secretary’s relationship with P.A.A.

When Haaland first went to Washington, her mother, Mary, whose work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs had occasionally taken her to D.C., had mixed feelings. “She knew about the bureaucracy and how things ran,” Denise told me, “and she was worried about Deb—all the obstacles that would be in her way.” But, for reasons both psychological and pragmatic, Haaland does not dwell on failure. Instead, she has retreated from public controversies and quietly used regulatory authority to accomplish what she can. In December, I watched her deliver the opening remarks at her third White House Tribal Nations Summit, an annual conference started by Obama, suspended by Trump, and restored by Biden. Haaland announced that the Administration had already spent a historic forty-five billion dollars in Indian country, more than fifteen years’ worth of the annual budget of the B.I.A., including investments in social services, pandemic response, and child welfare; infrastructure improvements, such as high-speed Internet; and the kind of long-overdue basic utilities that had eventually improved her grandmother’s life in Mesita—clean water, home electrification. “I see her fingerprints everywhere with the resources being sent to Indian country,” Chuck Hoskin, Jr., the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, told me.

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Haaland also established the Missing and Murdered Unit within the B.I.A., to try to solve the thousands of open cases concerning disappearances and homicides of American Indians and Alaska Natives. She created the Derogatory Geographic Names Task Force, which removed offensive language like “squaw” from the names of public lands. She pushed for more robust and expedient enforcement of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which was passed in 1990, and which created a legal framework enabling tribes to reclaim sacred objects and ancestral remains from any museum or institution that received federal funding. Haaland also helped defend the Indian Child Welfare Act after plaintiffs and several states sued to weaken the protections preventing the removal of Indian children from their tribes for adoption by non-Indians.

Some of this work could be undone by a future Secretary with a different set of priorities, but the tenor of the department has shifted. “Of all the things she could have chosen to try and do, she clearly chose to elevate tribal governments,” Hoskin told me, arguing that Haaland has “made the tribes as relevant as the states.” Mark Mitchell, the former chair of the All Pueblo Council of Governors, which represents the twenty Pueblo nations, emphasized the effect of Haaland simply being in the rooms where decisions about federal money and policy are made. “I think her presence alone says Native people and Indigenous people are alive and well, not just something from history,” he said.

Last November, in an auditorium on the campus of Montana State University, in Bozeman, two hundred people gathered for the last of the listening sessions that Haaland convened as part of the Boarding School Initiative. The school’s Bobcat Singers held a drumming circle, and a color guard presented the American, Montanan, and P.O.W./M.I.A. flags, together with an eagle-feather staff. Haaland and one of her principal deputy assistant secretaries, Wizipan Garriott, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe and a fourth-generation attendee of the boarding schools, took their seats at a simple folding table at the front of the room.

When Haaland was in Congress, she had sponsored a bill to create a federal truth-and-healing commission that would conduct a full interagency inquiry into the boarding schools. Sharice Davids, who also had grandparents who were sent away to boarding schools, co-sponsored the bill, but it has not passed. “You’ve got generations of people impacted in a really deeply personal, painful way by actions of the federal government,” Davids told me. “And, even though none of us who are in these decision-making positions caused that harm, we can make sure that these people are seen and heard.”

Haaland held the first listening session at the Riverside Indian School, in Oklahoma, the state with the most federal schools, at seventy-six. During a session just outside Seattle, in the gathering hall of the Tulalip

Indian Reservation, she watched as a Sicangu Lakota man brought forth replicas of the rope, belt, and leather straps he was beaten with at St. Francis Indian School. Other sessions were held in Alaska, Arizona, California, Michigan, Minnesota, and South Dakota. Nobody's remarks at any of the listening sessions were submitted in advance, no one was ever interrupted, and there were no time limits for those who spoke. One session took eight hours, and Haaland stayed until everyone who wanted to speak had finished. A court reporter made an official transcript of all the testimonies. There were also trauma specialists and licensed therapists on hand, along with whatever additional emotional and spiritual support local tribes wanted, from traditional singers and dancers to prayer, smudging, and massage. Haaland said that she would sometimes collapse in her car afterward, exhausted and overwhelmed by everything she had heard.

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In Bozeman, Haaland began by reading brief remarks. They were the same ones she had given at the other listening sessions, yet her voice, unpolished and faintly tremulous, still broke throughout. "I will listen with you," she told the crowd. "I will grieve with you, I will weep, and I will feel your pain. As we mourn what we have lost, please know that we still have so much to gain. The healing that can help our communities will not be done overnight, but it will be done. This is one step among many that we will take to strengthen and rebuild the bonds of the Native communities that the federal Indian boarding schools set out to break." She thanked those who were about to share their stories, and said that she knew it wasn't easy; then she sat down, and did not speak again for four hours.

Among the first people to address the room was Donovan Archambault, a member of the Assiniboine tribe who had attended the Pierre Boarding School, in South Dakota. Now eighty-four, Archambault wore a cowboy hat and a brightly colored vest. "Two of my sisters committed suicide," he said, holding the microphone close to his lips as he recounted his family's story. "Three of us almost drank ourselves to death." Later, Susan Webber, who attended the Cut Bank Creek Boarding School, on

the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, rose to speak. “I come from a long line of people that were institutionalized and brutalized,” she said. “We never talked about it.” Webber is now a state legislator, and she described a bill she had put forward in the Montana State Senate requesting a day of remembrance for all the children who died attending boarding schools. Several Cheyenne elders had travelled more than two hundred miles to the event. One, Myrna Burgess, talked about leaving her bucolic childhood behind for several dark years at St. Labre Indian School, in Ashland. The nuns hit her whenever she spoke Cheyenne. “The Cheyennes said as long as the water flows and the grass grows, we won’t lose our Cheyenne culture, our Indian ways,” Burgess said through tears. “And I don’t know if I still believe that.”

Each story was distinct and harrowing, but together they painted a consistent, damning picture. Survivors at the sessions spoke about their braids being cut off, and about being stripped of their Native clothing, then doused with disinfectants like gasoline and DDT. They described their mouths being washed out with lye soap for speaking their Native languages; they said that their Indian names were changed, sometimes replaced with only a number. They spoke of food being withheld as punishment, of physical abuse from teachers that made it hard to raise their own children lovingly, of sexual abuse that ruined intimacy of any kind. They shared stories of friends or family members who left for boarding school and never returned, and of their own struggles with anger, addiction, and depression. In Bozeman, Jennifer Finley, whose grandparents attended boarding schools, said, “When we talk about historical trauma, I always think, If only that’s all we had. But we have fresh trauma piled on it every single day.” A council member from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Finley was one of many descendants who testified about how intergenerational trauma from the schools continues to disrupt Native life. Haaland is not fluent in Keres—she says that her family members, after their experiences at the schools, were reluctant to teach it to their children.

At the session in Bozeman, Haaland took notes, wiped away tears, occasionally touched the tribal jewelry on her wrists, but never looked at her watch; she bowed her head and sometimes closed her eyes during someone's testimony, in pain or in prayer, but never interrupted or responded. There might as well have been no microphone in front of her. When I asked Puebloans about these listening sessions, they all described them as exemplifying tribal leadership. "That's how Pueblo leaders conduct ourselves," Mark Mitchell told me. "We hear our people out, whatever they are going to say."

For those unfamiliar with this heritage, Haaland's leadership style is distinctive: deploying silence in a bombastic political climate and empathy in an era of widespread contempt. These habits of being are rare in a politician, not least because they are so easily dismissed as pandering or scorned as weakness. Haaland's staff has an unwritten rule—in force not only during the listening tour but at all times, including when I was interviewing her—about always keeping tissues handy. Like the President who appointed her, she is unafraid to cry and has an impressive grace with suffering and grief.

"It takes courage and great strength to go listen to these horrendous stories," Deborah Parker, the C.E.O. of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, told me. The coalition was formed in 2011 to advocate for boarding-school survivors, and to educate the general public about the schools. Parker and Haaland have worked together since Haaland was elected to Congress. Both knew that certain aspects of the project could not wait. "We are losing our elders," Parker told me. "We needed to make time and space for these survivors to come forward before they are gone."

When an Interior Secretary is remembered, it is often for the litigation that bears his or her name. In 1996, Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Nation and a founder of the first American bank owned by a tribe, sued the Department of the Interior for mismanaging and abusing the trust funds it held for Native Americans—all the monies it managed

on their behalf from the sale and stewardship of tribal lands, going back to the earliest treaty guarantees. The case was originally docketed as Cobell v. Babbitt, for President Clinton's Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt. Then the lawsuit dragged on, becoming Cobell v. Norton, for Gale Norton, George W. Bush's first Secretary, then Cobell v. Kempthorne, for Dirk Kempthorne, his second. When the suit was finally settled, in 2009, thirteen years after Cobell first filed it—by which time some three hundred thousand plaintiffs had joined her—it was known as Cobell v. Salazar, for Ken Salazar, Obama's first Secretary. The class-action settlement was one of the largest in American history: nearly three and a half billion dollars, split between the plaintiffs and a land-buyback program for restoring tribal homelands.

U.S. District Judge Royce C. Lamberth oversaw Cobell's case for a decade, during which time he held two Interior Secretaries, from both parties, in contempt of court. He was reassigned before the settlement was reached. "I have never seen more egregious misconduct by the federal government," he wrote in one filing, denouncing the Department of the Interior's attempts to deprive plaintiffs of discovery documents related to the mismanaged funds. "When one strips away the convoluted statutes, the technical legal complexities, the elaborate collateral proceedings, and the layers upon layers of interrelated orders and opinions from this Court and the Court of Appeals, what remains is the raw, shocking, humiliating truth at the bottom: After all these years, our government still treats Native American Indians as if they were somehow less than deserving of the respect that should be afforded to everyone in a society where all people are supposed to be equal."

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It was Judge Lamberth who, not quite twenty years after he was appointed by Reagan, called the Department of the Interior a "culturally oblivious hand-me-down." Talking with me recently about the class-action settlement and Haaland's tenure, he said, "It's an accomplishment in itself" that any Native American could become the head of Interior. His work on Cobell's case radicalized him, fundamentally transforming his understanding of our nation's history, including the ongoing

discrimination against Native Americans, which he'd assumed had ended generations before. He wrote that the failures of the trust administration were a blow to all "those harboring hope that the stories of murder, dispossession, forced marches, assimilationist policy programs, and other incidents of cultural genocide against the Indians are merely the echoes of a horrible, bigoted government-past that has been sanitized by the good deeds of more recent history."

The possibility of that kind of transformation is what inspired the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. Although the first two years of the initiative focussed on survivors, and on documenting what happened at the schools, Haaland is using the time she has left in office to turn outward, trying to reach those who are at best indifferent to and at worst defenders of America's brutal treatment of its first peoples. When the second volume of the boarding-school report is released, later this year, it will likely include recommendations for restitution. She hopes that its contents will fuel research and reconciliation efforts around the country; many hope that it will inspire moral if not monetary reparations. So much of the work thus far has been done by tribes, and not nearly enough by the religious institutions that ran boarding schools or the local communities that staffed them or the general public that failed to notice them.

Haaland is committed to staying at Interior through the election in November, but she is circumspect about her plans after that, even if Biden is reelected. A few months after her term began, she married her boyfriend, Skip Sayre, a widowed gaming-and-hospitality executive who was then the marketing director for the Laguna Development Corporation. They own a condo not far from Haaland's office, along with an adobe home outside Albuquerque, where they have two rescue dogs, Winchester and Remington. Haaland, now sixty-three, still runs marathons, and the pair enjoy hiking together. It is harder, these days, for Haaland to return to her ancestral home in Mesita, but she was there after her mother died, during her first year at Interior, and she sees her family often. She still hopes to get her master's degree from U.C.L.A.

and recently finished her thesis. She has spent more than three hundred and sixty-five days on the road during her time as Secretary. Amid her travels, which have taken her to fifty-one states and territories, she has tried to stream the occasional television show, lately “True Detective” or “Derry Girls.” She also reads narrative nonfiction, most recently “A Fever in the Heartland,” Timothy Egan’s history of the K.K.K. in the Midwest. She has a soft spot for obituaries, she told me, specifically those of “people who did amazing things, but nobody knew about their lives.”

Looking back, her nomination still seems an improbable event—and, perhaps, not the kind likely to be re-created anytime soon. Haaland recognizes that getting a broad swath of the nation to engage with the suffering and the needs of Native people will be difficult, but she has no recrimination in her voice when she talks about the challenge: “You know, I sometimes think about the state of our country. And I know there’s a lot of people who, when I think about how things were for me, how difficult certain times in my life were, when all I could think about was paying rent and buying food—it’s not like you have a lot of leisure time to think about the problems in the world.” Time is scarce and attention is limited, not just for working people but for everyone. Yet Haaland is determined to make it impossible to be indifferent to this history. “I sometimes wonder, What do you choose to read?” she said. “What do you choose to think about? What do you choose to know?” ♦