

Washington Lets Apaches Wear Feathers

The end of 'Operation Powwow' is a victory for religious freedom.



close up of eagle feathers PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

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Breaking news: The federal government has agreed to allow a group of Native Americans to practice their religious faith. Yes, that's news given Obama Administration hostility to freedom of conscience. On Monday lawyers for the Department of the Interior and the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty intend to ask a federal judge to approve a settlement allowing the Lipan Apache tribe of Texas to use eagle feathers in the traditional exercise of their beliefs.

Last year we told you about the hare-brained "Operation Powwow" in which agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service investigated the Lipan Apache and then confiscated their feathers under federal laws designed to protect migratory birds. The Lipan Apache would never kill eagles since they consider the birds "a great gift from God our Creator," according to their pastor, Robert Soto. But since the tribe was recognized by Texas but not by Washington—even though the feds

did recognize tribe members as Native Americans—the government claimed they were using feathers without a permit.

Pastor Soto was able to get his feathers back thanks to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. But his victory did not extend to the rest of the tribe. Now, thanks to the new settlement, he will be able to share these sacred objects with other worshippers and with “generations to follow,” he tells us. He will start by leading a Monday ceremony to spiritually cleanse the feathers. He reports that when the feds took them they dragged them on the ground, a great taboo among the faithful.

Readers can be forgiven for wondering why the tribe had to go to court simply to enjoy the first freedom mentioned in the Bill of Rights. All Americans can now be grateful to Pastor Soto and his flock for rising in defense of this vital liberty.