

## Ahenakew's legacy left in tatters

**Will Chabun**

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REGINA -- David Ahenakew's biography on the Governor General's Web site of Order of Canada recipients paints the Saskatchewan Native leader in glowing terms.

"AHENAKEW, DAVID: Member of a United Nations committee and of the World Indigenous Peoples Council. His many years of service to Indians and Metis in Saskatchewan culminated in his election as chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, which has revolutionized Indian education in his province," the site says.

Ahenakew's legacy is in danger of being swept away by a bizarre, racist speech to the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations last week.

The Web site account dates from 1979, when Ahenakew was invested as a member of the Order of Canada, a symbol of the esteem in which he was held. Another symbol was the honorary doctorate he received in 1977 from the University of Regina.

A biography on the Web site of the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College (SICC) says Ahenakew was born on July 28, 1933, at the Sandy Lake Indian reserve (now the Ahtahkakoop First Nation) near Prince Albert. In 1951, he married Grace Ahenakew; they had three sons and two daughters.

He also joined the Canadian Army in 1951, serving for 16 years, most in the corps of engineers.

"He achieved the rank of sergeant while serving in Germany, Egypt and the Korean conflict," said the SICC biography, adding he was awarded the army's CD (Canada Decoration) for distinguished service and good conduct in 1964.

He took a job as a placement and training officer with the Saskatchewan government in 1967, a post that gave him the opportunity to work closely with band councils. In 1968, he joined the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (forerunner of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations) as a communications worker. He was elected its president later that year, remaining in that position for 10 years.

Says the SICC bio: "His long period of service in the army very much influenced his decision to enter into politics. 'I could see that what was happening to our people was the same kind of exploitation and degradation I had seen in Korea and Egypt.' "

It added, "His election as president really marked a generational change within the leadership of the organization. Ahenakew was well-educated, energetic, ambitious and in relation to past leaders, he was quite young. . . . Ahenakew was certainly the new, young vibrant leader that the Indian electorate seemed to be looking for at this time.



**David Ahenakew**

"He set the FSI on the course of building and organizing the programs and institutions of today."

Among them were the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina.

"Brusque and crewcut, Ahenakew runs the show like the army officer he once was," wrote Saskatchewan journalist Dennis Gruending in the leftist magazine *The Last Post* in 1975. "He and his executive officers and some of the chiefs from the province's Indian bands are involved in a constant round of meetings, negotiations and travel to and from Ottawa, where the federal Department of Indian Affairs controls the pursestrings which keep the reserves and the FSI afloat."

Ahenakew was active in the formation of the National Indian Brotherhood and its successor, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), being elected as the AFN's chief in 1982.

A year later, he took a risky step by declining to join Metis and Inuit leaders in challenging the country's new Constitution and instead emphasized his job representing "status Indians."

He narrowly survived a non-confidence vote in February 1985.

Running for a second term as AFN chief, he was defeated in July 1985 by George Erasmus, bitterly refusing to shake the victor's hand.

He ran unsuccessfully for the leadership of the FSIN in 1986, but became a senator, or political elder, in it.

In 1989, he was charged with multiple counts of fraud in connection with donations to the 1984 Liberal leadership campaign of Hamilton's John Munro. Ahenakew, Munro and all Indian leaders from Saskatchewan were acquitted two years later. Of the Conservative government that brought the charges, he said bitterly, "We were getting too strong, getting very influential at the highest level of government, like we were with the Liberals. They thought they had to put us in our place."

He was in the news in 2000 with a characteristically blunt recommendation of how to fend off provincial government scrutiny of Indian-run casinos:

"The province has to back off and allow us our money, our business, our jurisdiction . . . get the hell out of there. Then everything would be fine."

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