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## Let Indians Have Their Big Bingo

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editorial

"It's ridiculous to hinge our status as sovereign entities on bingo, but people are forcing that issue upon us." So says the president of the National Congress of American Indians. He refers to the Indians' struggle to hang on to big-jackpot bingo games, a thriving tribal business.

Unregulated bingo may be a "ridiculous" totem of Indian sovereignty, but it is also an unusually important source of revenue for poor reservations, where unemployment may exceed 40 percent. Washington has an interest in protecting tribal bingo against corruption by organized crime. But the nation also has an interest in preserving this means to Indian economic development.

About 120 tribes now operate bingo games, drawing players from non-Indian communities several hundred miles away. Because the reservations are subject to Federal rather than state law, the Indians enjoy a competitive advantage over churches, fraternal groups and other organizations that run bingo games for charity. No state regulations, for

example, limit tribal jackpots. On the Oneida reservation in northern Wisconsin, twice-daily prizes average \$10,000 six days a week. A tribal spokesman calls bingo a "multimillion-dollar business."

States itch to regulate Indian bingo because they want to tax the games and also reduce competition for non-Indian parlors. Federal courts have properly blocked the states from infringing on Indian sovereignty. But the states keep trying to legislate payout limits and bar non-Indians from collecting the reservation jackpots. Each attempt produces a new round of litigation.

Senator Dennis DeConcini and Representative Morris Udall propose a Federal standard that deserves enactment. The most important provision would guard against corruption by requiring tribes to let the Secretary of Interior inspect the contracts by which they employ bingo managers. This minimal oversight responds to the most legitimate concern of state regulators. Let it pass, and then let the Indian bingo thrive.