Native American Mascots: Racial Slur or Cherished Tradition?

by Phyllis Raybin Emert

Native American mascots and nicknames can be seen everywhere in our society. People drive Jeep Cherokees, watch Atlanta Braves baseball fans do the tomahawk chop and enjoy professional and college football teams such as the Kansas City Chiefs and the Florida State University Seminoles. Are the use of these symbols a tribute to the Native American people, or as some feel, a slap in the face to their honored traditions?

Across the country, according to the National Coalition on Race and Sports in Media, which is part of the American Indian Movement (AIM), there are more than 3,000 racist or offensive mascots used in high school, college or professional sports teams. In New Jersey alone, there are dozens of schools that use Native American images and symbols such as braves, warriors, chiefs or Indians for their sports teams. In April 2001, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that all non-Native American schools drop their Native American mascots or nicknames. The commission declared that "the stereotyping of any racial, ethnic, religious or other group, when promoted by our public educational institutions, teaches all students that stereotyping of minority groups is acceptable, which is a dangerous lesson in a diverse society." The commission also noted that these nicknames and mascots are "false portrayals that encourage biases and prejudices that have a negative effect on contemporary Indian people."

Harmless fun?

For years, Native American organizations have opposed the use of such mascots, finding them offensive and a racial slur against their people. Supporters of the nicknames believe they honor Native Americans and focus on their bravery, courage and fighting skills.

Karl Swanson, vice-president of the Washington Redskins professional football team, declared in the magazine *Sports Illustrated* that his team's name "symbolizes courage, dignity, and leadership," and that the "Redskins symbolize the greatness and strength of a grand people."

In the Native American mascot controversy, the nickname "redskins" is particularly controversial and offensive. Historically, the term was used to refer to the scalps of dead Native Americans that were exchanged for money as bounties, or cash rewards. When it became too difficult to bring in the bodies of dead Indians to get the money (usually under a dollar per person), bounty hunters exchanged bloody scalps or "redskins" as evidence of the dead Indian.

In 1992 seven Native Americans filed a lawsuit against the Washington Redskins football club. Suzan Shown Harjo, one of the **plaintiffs** in the case, wrote in her essay, "Fighting Name-Calling: Challenging 'Redskins' in Court," which appeared in the book, titled, *Team Spirits-The Native American Mascots Controversy*, that they "petitioned the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for cancellation of federal registrations for Redskins and Redskinettes...and associated names of the team in the nation's capital." In 1999, the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board "found that Redskins was an offensive term historically and remained so from the first trademark license in 1967, to the present." In a 145-page decision, the panel unanimously canceled the federal trademarks because they "may **disparage** Native Americans and may bring them into contempt or disrepute," Harjo reported. The Washington Redskins appealed the decision and the case is now pending in federal district court.

Demeaning or entertaining?

Supporters contend that such nicknames are an entertaining part of a cherished tradition and were never intended to harm or make a mockery of any group. There is also a financial side to the issue. The sale of merchandise with team mascots and nicknames on items such as t-shirts, hats and jackets brings in millions of dollars to various schools and sports teams every year. A changeover would cost money and render much of the current merchandise obsolete, the teams contend.

Opponents of Native American mascots and nicknames are not concerned about the cost and use words such as disrespectful and hurtful, degrading and humiliating to describe what they believe is racial **stereotyping**. They regard the mascots as **caricatures** of real Indians that trivialize and demean native dances and sacred Indian rituals. "It's the behavior that accompanies all of this that's offensive," Clyde Bellecourt told *USA Today*. Bellecourt, who is national director of AIM, said "The rubber tomahawks, the chicken feather headdresses, people wearing war paint and making these ridiculous war whoops with a tomahawk in one hand and a beer in the other-all of these have significant meaning for us. And the psychological impact it has, especially on our youth, is devastating."

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What is the price of entertainment?

What is at stake, opponents of Native American mascots argue, is the self-image and self-esteem of American Indian children. "Their pride is being mocked," Matthew Beaudet, an attorney and president of the Illinois Native American Bar Association, explained in "More Than a Mascot," an article that appeared in the newsletter, *School Administrator*. "The Native American community is saying we know you're trying to flatter us, but we're not flattered, so stop."

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen agrees. "It hardly enhances the self-esteem of an Indian youth to always see his people and himself represented as a cartoon character," Cohen wrote. "And, always, the caricature is suggestive of battle, of violence — of the Indian warrior, the brave, the chief, the warpath, the beating of tom-toms."

Survey says

The mascot issue is most controversial at the local level. Although numerous schools have voluntarily taken action to cease using Native American symbols, (see sidebar) many school boards have refused to do so. Supporters of Native American mascots and nicknames point to surveys, such as the one published by *Sports Illustrated* in March 2002, which found that although most Native American **activists** found Indian mascots and nicknames offensive, the majority of non-activist American Indians were not disturbed by them. American Indian activists explained the discrepancy in the *Sports Illustrated* article that accompanied the survey, saying, "Native Americans' self-esteem has fallen so low that they don't even know when they're being insulted." Harjo, who is president of the Morning Star Institute, an Indian-rights organization in Washington D.C., stated in her essay, "There are happy campers on every plantation." Harjo implied that although many slaves may have been content with their lives in bondage, the institution of slavery still needed to be abolished and the same reasoning holds true for Native American mascots. According to the *Sports Illustrated* survey, 87 percent of American Indians who lived off Indian **reservations** did not object to Native American mascots or nicknames. Of the Indians who lived on reservations, 67 percent were not bothered by the nicknames, while 33 percent opposed them. In addition to the survey, those who would like to keep the traditional Native American nicknames give examples of American Indian tribes that have openly embraced schools and teams using their names. At Arapahoe High School in Littleton, Colorado, for example, the Warriors' school gym is named for Anthony Sitting Eagle, an Arapaho leader. Every year on Arapaho Day, tribal members come from the reservation to visit with students and teach Arapaho history and traditions. Tribal leaders have also advised the Warriors on how to make their logo authentic, and even persuaded the school to remove a painting on the gym floor because it was offensive to have students walk over it. Similar close relationships exist between Florida State University and the Seminole tribe, Central Michigan University and the Chippewa tribe and the Arcadia High School Apaches in California, who have a relationship with an American Indian tribe in Arizona.

Racial slur or cherished tradition?

The Native American mascot issue has caused debate throughout the country between communities and school boards, students and Native American groups. Although the outcome of the debates has varied from state to state, with some communities refusing to change, the trend in recent years has been to eliminate offensive Native American mascots and nicknames at schools and colleges. Not a single professional sports team, however, has changed its name. Given the strong opinions on both sides and the pending Washington Redskins case, the controversy will no doubt rage on.