

Symbolic Racism, History, and Reality

The Real Problem with Indian Mascots

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The stadium lights starburst above the misty football field. The band blares and pounds out the school's fight song like only a hometown high school band can do. Blond, perky cheerleaders clap as they hop from foot to foot, rousing the fans to a controlled roar. Two of them hold a huge sign, painted painstakingly while sprawled across a dusty, linoleum-lined corridor. The men of the hour prepare to enter the arena of combat. They begin a slow trot, then burst through the paper to shouting cheerleaders—"Kill the Indians!" they scream.

Many people would say I am overreacting to be offended by this scenario. After all, what's more American than high school football? What could be a more wholesome activity for young people in today's age, when so many more dangerous temptations beset them

at every side—drugs, alcohol, unprotected sex, and gang activity? I think the danger of this situation is that it is so precisely American. Americans in general see the Indian mascot controversy as “silly,” and there are admittedly American Indians who see it the same way. . . . However, I think the danger of this use is more than just its potential to offend. It is representative of an endemic problem: racism against America’s First Peoples. Despite the fact that racial problems still exist in our country, for the most part we are in a day and age where racial tolerance and tolerance for all kinds of diversity has increased. But this is not the case with racism against American Indians, largely because racism against American Indians is so ingrained in the American consciousness that it is invisible.

Dr. Cornell Pewewardy of the University of Kansas calls this kind of racism “dysconscious racism,” or, in other words, racism that the people themselves who exhibit it are unaware of. The use of American Indian mascots falls under this category. The grossly exaggerated features of the Cleveland Indian, the cartooned vicious savages decorating high school spirit ribbons, the painted, dancing, fake-buckskin-clad white kids running down the sideline doing tomahawk chops, are all unintentionally stereotypical and aren’t even perceived by most Americans as negative. They fall in the same category as rock singer Ted Nugent’s ridiculous stage antics in a fluorescent mockery of a Plains chief’s headdress. They fall under the same category as cigar store Indians topping car dealerships. They fall under the same category as words like “squaw,” “papoose,” “wagon burner,” and “Indian giver.” They fall under the same category as Disney’s painted bombshell Pocahontas and the 36–24–36 asking-for-it Aztec seductress from *El Dorado* or her grotesquely depicted male counterparts. . . . The average American engages in this behavior without ever being aware of it, much less realizing that it is racism.

Every semester I ask my students what is in the front foyer of Applebee’s restaurant. None of them, not even if they work there, are ever able to tell me there is a statue of an Indian man, in nonspecific tribal attire, often with a “special of the day” sign around his neck. Applebee’s claims this statue “points to the next nearest Applebee’s”; I guarantee that if a major restaurant chain placed a statue of an African American man in supposed tribal dress in the front of each of its restaurants pointing to the next nearest one, people would realize these statues were inappropriate. In the same way, as many others have pointed out, if we had sports teams named the New York Niggers or the Jersey Jigaboos, Americans would know this was wrong. The average American, who would clearly perceive the Louisville Lynched Porch Monkeys as a problematic name for a team doesn’t even realize the Washington Redskins emerges from a history of the literal bloody skins of American Indian men, women, and children being worth British Crown bounty money—no one’s skin is red. American Indian skin is brown, at least when it is on our bodies and not stripped from us in the name of profit and expansionism. African Americans, thank God, have raised the consciousness of Americans enough through the civil rights movement to keep the more obvious forms of racism usually hidden, though it took publicly armed Black Panthers, the burning of Chicago, and even the riots of Los Angeles to get this point across. American Indians are frankly so used to being literally shot down if we stick our heads up, we aren’t nearly as likely to do so. In fact, from our own civil rights movement with AIM, we still have Indians like Leonard Peltier, who stuck their heads up although incarcerated for over twenty years when even the FBI admits its evidence was fabricated.

Racism against American Indians is so intrinsically part of America’s political mythology, . . . that without it this country would have to do something it has never done: face colonial guilt. Everything we see around us was made from stolen American Indian resources, resources raped from this Earth that we consider sacred, an Earth in danger of global disaster from imbalanced greed. We live like no people in the history of the world have ever lived. Our poorest are rich in comparison to the world’s average citizen. We all—Indian, Euro American, Asian American, African American, or Chicano—have

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benefited at least in some material way from the murders of an estimated one hundred million people, crimes that are still going on in this hemisphere, in Mexico, in Argentina, in Oklahoma, in South Dakota, in New Mexico, Arizona, Montana, and more. These acts, along with innumerable rapes, along with untold numbers of sterilizations of women even up to the past few decades, along with the removal of children without cause from their parents' homes, from their cultures, along with the destruction of language, with the outlawing of religious freedom up until 1978, constitute what is defined as genocide under the United Nations Convention on Genocide's definition, a document never signed by the United States, because under it, that very government owes restitution to both American Indians and to African Americans, an estimated forty to sixty million of whom were killed during the slave trade before they ever reached the shores of the "New World."

An estimated six million Jews died in the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany, being treated before and after death in ways the world will never forgive—starved, herded naked like cattle, poisoned to an excruciating death, made into curios—lampshades, little collectibles for the Nazi elite. But this we recognize as inhuman, not the kind of behavior we as people can tolerate. We see the sins of Germany and the sins of Bosnia, where former students report seeing little girls with dolls still in their arms, dead with open eyes in mass graves, for what they are. But unlike the rest of the world, we as Americans cannot see our own. We are not taught in school that Columbus's men smashed babies' heads on rocks in front of their mothers. We are not taught that they sliced people in two for fun, in bets over whose sword was the sharpest. We are not taught they tied men up after slaving in silver mines all day, threw them under their hammocks, and raped their wives above them. We aren't taught that the Pilgrims were called the "cut-throat people" by the Indians, who taught them survival and feasted with them because, at one meal the good Christians invited them to, those very Christians took their knives and slit them from ear to ear. We aren't taught that our "forefathers" roasted Pequot men, women, and children alive in their beds. We aren't taught that Thomas Jefferson promoted miscegenation as a means of eradicating the "Indian problem." We are not taught that American soldiers collected labia and breasts and penises for curios after slaughtering women, children, and old men on what must be considered, when we look at the primary evidence of American history, a routine basis. The list goes on and on. We aren't, indeed, taught a lot of things. And we aren't taught them for a good reason. . . .

American Indian Nations are the only sovereign nations the United States government has ever broken over five hundred treaties with, violations that Russell Means rightly suggests gives these nations the legal justification to issue one huge eviction notice to the United States, the only nations whose citizens are owed . . . billions of dollars in money that was held in "trust" for Indians thought incapable of being responsible for it, billions of dollars that same United States government has lost. Despite this, American Indians serve this country in its military forces in higher numbers per capita than any other ethnic group—and have in every war since the American Revolution. Despite this, American Indians on the whole maintain a huge amount of respect for this country and the flag that flies above it.

The real problem with the kind of dysconscious, symbolic, abstract racism that is perpetuated today by sports mascots and the kind of historical, intentionally inculcated, politically motivated racism that enabled the near total genocide of American Indian peoples is that it enables very real, very concrete, and very conscious acts of violent racism that American Indian people still face in this country and this hemisphere on a daily basis. It is our conceptualization of people that dictates our behavior toward them. Most Americans don't come into contact with Indians on a daily basis because of that very genocide, or when they do, because of the campaign of rape and encouraged miscegenation through

intermarriage, they don't realize they do. To most Americans, American Indians themselves are invisible. . . . But for Americans who live near or on reservations or tribally controlled lands and for our neighbors to the south, who very much still realize an Indian presence in "their" countries, . . . and because of the atmosphere of hatred that the dysconscious racism of the rest of the country allows and even promotes, violence abounds.

This is not to say that no other group in America is still subject to prejudice-induced violence. There are occasionally still unspeakable acts against African Americans like the one in Jasper, Texas. There are also unfortunately incidents of violent bigotry against homosexuals, like the one in Laramie, Wyoming, that led to the creation of federal hate-crime legislation. But the fact is that American Indian women are twice as likely as black men to die of homicide. White males commit most of these murders; most involve alcohol sold by white proprietors on reservation borders; many are never prosecuted. Like the murders in the 1970s that instigated the American Indian movement to begin with and the rash of Indian killings that followed it, these murders go largely unnoticed by mainstream America. So do the beatings. So do the rapes. If "real" Indians don't exist in the American mind, then hate crimes against them have no room in the American imagination of possibility. And the media, the same media that descends from that which actively promoted the extermination of Indians through the early 1900s, don't cover that continued extermination now because of their early effectiveness in our erasure.

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Perpetuators of conscious racism in more Indian-populated regions of this country will justify their behavior with accusations that Indians themselves act in such a way that it encourages the negative stereotype—we are all unemployed, government-money-grubbing drunks. Yes, as well as having a higher rate of homicides, American Indians have a higher rate of every cultural malaise that can be imagined—a higher rate of unemployment, a higher rate of high school dropouts, a higher suicide rate, a higher rate of drug abuse, a higher rate of alcoholism, a higher rate of teen pregnancy, a higher rate of infant mortality . . . but one must consider the kind of low self-esteem that both conscious historical racism and dysconscious contemporary racism in the form of things like sports mascots brings about. Not only do Indian people have to deal with the fallout of being "conquered" people, the "survivor guilt" from being alive and suckered in by colonialist capitalism when so many were butchered in its creation, the shame of being men who descended from those unable to protect our women and children in the face of a demonic killing machine we could have never envisioned in our traditional cultures, the shame of being women who descended from those raped and tortured, or those who married or enconcupined themselves to European men as a means of survival. We have to deal with images of ourselves that do not match who we are—human beings. Moreover, Indian people *themselves* sometimes unconsciously internalize the stereotypical images projected on them by mainstream culture—"of course I can't succeed, I'm an Indian. I ought to either be dead or dead drunk." In comparison, the noble-savage ideal promoted by those who claim to be honoring Indians by using mascots based on Native peoples seems complimentary. No wonder some Indians find no problem with racially based mascots. American Indians are *not* all stereotypical unemployed drunks. Most are hardworking struggling, long-suffering individuals who despite the rarity of opportunity for mainstream success fight daily to keep alive what proud cultural and spiritual traditions we have remaining after the near extermination of our peoples, fight daily to minimize the risks of the negative impact of colonization on our children and promote education for them both in our traditional ways and in the mainstream ways that will ensure their success in both of the worlds in which they must live. No, we are not all dead. Neither are our extremely diverse cultures. And far from being the beneficiaries of government welfare, the average American Indian lives far

below poverty level—if you have never visited a reservation like the Northern Cheyenne live on in Lama Deer or that Lakota people live on in Pine Ridge or Rosebud, then you have never seen what poverty in this country really is, not even if you have lived in the poorest of poor urban ghettos. . . . [G]overnment “handouts” like commodity cheese, the far-below-standard medical treatment dispensed by the Indian Health Service, or money distributed to the tribe for housing or other needs is dispensed, it falls way short of the government’s promises to Indian peoples—that our ancestors and their descendants (us, even those of us with the lowest blood quantum) would be provided for in perpetuity in exchange for our means of providing for ourselves: our lands, the lands that we cultivated for agricultural products, the lands we obtained our game from, the lands our ancestors lived on for centuries and our cultures are tied to, the lands our ancestors rest in. We are more than aware of what we have lost—and cartoonish depictions that make light of both those very losses and us do nothing to encourage mainstream “achievement” among our peoples. And though money from casinos has recently created an influx of capital that some tribes are using to promote economic development, it has by no means enriched the average Indian, and the existence of the casinos themselves, which the tribes as sovereign nations under the United States Constitution have the right to legally create on their own ever-shrinking land bases, is continually under attack from the states, which have no legal jurisdiction over the tribes or their lands.

Sports mascots might indeed seem to be a small issue in light of all of this. And while, admittedly, American Indians have much greater problems to worry about, I would contend that the mascots are both symptomatic of racism and promote it. Some contend that other mascots, like Notre Dame’s Fighting Irish, are based on racial identity and that no other group has raised issue with this. However, I would suggest that this is because the creation of “white” as an ethnicity in America’s great melting pot has both cooked off cultural identification and a strong sense of heritage for the descendants of late immigrants and early indentured servants and erased colonial guilt for the still-at-the-top-of-the-heap descendants of those who actually engaged in active genocide. The descendants of Irish American immigrants—me included, as some of my ancestors were Irish, along with those who were Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, German, and Welsh—aren’t offended by the Fighting Irish because they don’t have a great stake in Irish identity, unlike those who live in Dublin and deal daily with what being Irish, much less Catholic Irish or Protestant Irish, entails. . . .

After all of the offenses our peoples have suffered throughout the history of Europeans in the Americas and in light of the kind of racism to which American Indians are still subject, it seems a small thing to me that some of us ask that sports mascots that depict American Indians be eliminated. After all, it is not that we are asking for what we will never receive—we aren’t asking for a return of our stolen lands or even payment for them, we aren’t asking that all of the broken treaties be honored or that the United States pay full restitution to us under the United Nations Convention on Genocide. We aren’t even asking for a formal apology by a United States president for the atrocities our ancestors suffered. We are simply asking for the same respect that other ethnic groups receive in this country. We are simply asking to be recognized as people, not as television images, not as cartoons.