

Indians Are a People, Not Mascots by Fred Veilleux

Fred Veilleux is a Chippewa Indian from the Leech Lake band in Minnesota. The following essay was published in *The Price We Pay: The Case Against Racist Speech*, *Hot Propaganda*, and *Pornography*, edited by Laura Lederer and Richard Delgado and published in 1995. In recent years, there has been a heated debate about the significance of using Indian-themed mascots and team names for educational and sporting groups. In his essay, Veilleux argues for eliminating these mascots and logos, which he believes are a form of racism.



In 1987, a colleague of mine, Phil St. John, a Dakota from Sessiton, South Dakota, who now lives and works in the Twin Cities, attended a high school basketball game with his family. During the game, a match between the Southwest High School Indians and the Osseo High School Orfoles, a white student paraded around wearing his version of Indian dress and regalia with painted face and headband, acting out his version of how an American Indian behaves, all presumably to show school spirit.

Phil and I worked together at a community clinic located in the heart of the urban Indian community in Minneapolis. Upon arriving at work the next day Phil told me how the Southwest student's behavior had caused his eight-year-old son to shrink down behind him in humiliation. Phil stated that he himself didn't know how to deal with it and concluded that there's no reason why we should have to deal with it. The sight of this war-whooping student-fan struck him as mockery of his ethnicity and religious beliefs.

He asked if I would help him compose a letter to send to the school and the Minneapolis School Board, demanding that the school change its team name. Phil and I and a third friend presented our case before the board. It took two months to convince them to change the name (they are now called the Southwest

LITERARY LENS
Thinks about the persuasive techniques the author uses while you're reading this essay.



* Read the article & write 3 higher level ?s (2 copies) for as large class student-lead seminar.

genocide
deliberate destruction of a racial, ethnic, or cultural group
indigenous
native; original

High Lakers). It was at this point that Phil founded the Concerned American Indian Parents organization. We then decided to take this issue to the Minnesota State Board of Education and confront the remaining fifty schools that use Indian names or characters for their mascots, names like "Chiefs," "Braves," "Redmen," "Redskins." We argued that "Indian" is clearly the name of a race group, and while it may be neutral in some cases, when it is used as a team mascot, it is degrading and exploitive.

To help educators acquire a perspective on this issue, we reviewed a little U.S. history. For example, it was not at all uncommon for early American writers to denigrate the Indian people by calling them "heathens," "savages," and "cannibals" in order to lend Christian justification to the genocide of Indian people. Making the indigenous people less than human helped make killing them seem to be no more than killing wild animals. When Europeans first came to the shores of Indian country some 500 years ago, the estimated population of Indian people in this land, now called the United States, was 15 million. By 1900, it was 250,000. The majority of lives were lost due to diseases brought here by Europeans, ones for which Indian people had no immunity, such as smallpox, bubonic plague, tuberculosis, malaria, yellow fever, and influenza, but there is historical evidence that the U.S. Cavalry¹ deliberately provided Indian people with blankets that were infested with smallpox. The white man's relentless hunger for Indian land and westward expansion threatened the lives and way of life of the Indian people. The Indian people bravely defended their homelands against this Euro-American invasion in battles at Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee—all massacres of Indians. Yet it is the Indians who are characterized as warlike aggressors. This false characterization is one of the factors we are fighting against in the mascot issue.

Consider, for example, the origin of the term "redskin." Many colonial leaders followed an express policy of extermination. General George Washington wrote a letter ordering his men to

¹ U.S. Cavalry troops on horseback, often associated with Old West aggression, against the native Indians

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clear the New England area of its Indian population by killing as many of them as possible. In 1755, his excellency, William Shirley, esquire, captain general and governor in chief of the province of Massachusetts Bay, issued a proclamation promoting the murdering of American Indians, and placing bounties on their heads, scalps, and skin. The term "red skins" was first used to describe this bounty placed on Native Americans. For every male Indian prisoner of the age of twelve brought to Boston, fifty pounds in currency was offered. For every male Indian scalp brought in as evidence of being killed, forty pounds was paid. In 1764, the governor of Pennsylvania also offered a reward, "for the scalp of every male Indian enemy above the age of ten years, one hundred and thirty-four pieces of eight." For the scalp of every female above the age of ten years, the sum of fifty pieces of eight was paid. Once you know the history of this term, it is easier to understand why we object to its use as a sports team name.

Schools and educational institutes also played a role in destroying Indian culture. In 1819, Congress directed the Federal Indian Service, a branch of the War Department, to teach Native children. In the 1870s the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the U.S. government began building its own system of boarding schools. From the start, boarding schools maintained a stern military tone. Richard Pratt, who established Carlisle Indian School, the first off-reservation school, was a military man. This system of education was often referred to as "schooling the savage." Pratt always thought the best way to domesticate the Indians was to make them into European-style farmers. The government's first target was language, the heart of any culture. Hundreds of Native languages and dialects were replaced by English. Children were whipped or had their mouths washed with soap for speaking their Indian language. Kids ran away almost every day. Historians say that many Indian families became eager for their children to get a boarding school education. But other families refused. In the early years, government agents withheld rations of food and clothing, forcing their cooperation. In other places, Indian children were taken from reluctant families at gunpoint. Parents were thrown in jail. Nearly a half million Indian children went to those schools.

domesticate
to tame or bring
under control

Virtually every Indian family has boarding school stories to tell. So while public schools were instituting Indian mascot names and logos, real Indians were undergoing the experience of cultural genocide. Little wonder that Indians resist racism at schools.

The majority of mascot names were adopted in the early 1900s, a period when racism against Indians was rife. Many high schools throughout the United States were named after American historical figures—few of whom are American Indian. Instead, we were bestowed the **dubious** honor of being foolish-looking mascots for Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin high schools. Approximately 1,500 high schools, ninety colleges and universities, and five professional sports teams currently do us this form of "honor."

It took us a year to convince the school board of the inappropriateness of using the name of a race of people for a mascot. We were joined in this effort by the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union, which argued that it is unconstitutional to single out a race group in a public school for any purpose other than an educational one. The MCLU threatened to file suit against those schools who refused to change their team names. Since then, thirty-three of the fifty schools have changed their names either voluntarily or by order of their local school board.

The purpose of a mascot in sports is to serve as a focal point for fans to express allegiance to the home team or opposition to the visiting team. Sports fans, students, and faculty wear banners, T-shirts, and buttons to identify themselves. When the target or mascot is a race of people, the buttons or banners say, for example, "Scalp the Indians," "Skin the Chiefs," or "Hang the Redskins." On one side of the stadium, fans with painted faces and chicken-feather headaddresses do the tomahawk chop, while on the other side, the bleachers ring with cheers like, "Kill the Indians!" This activity represents a form of institutional racism. It also distorts our identity, the identity of our ancestors, and an honest depiction of American history. In addition, it creates an environment where Indian people, families, and children become targets for mockery and ridicule.

It is our understanding—hope, really—that this kind of mistreatment stems from society's miseducation. Public school

dubious
suspicious; unpromising

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textbooks came into use in the late 1800s when Indians were depicted as savage and less than human. These characterizations continued throughout public education and were compounded with the onslaught of dime novels and Hollywood westerns. Although these images are gradually being replaced by more benign ones, educational institutions continue to perpetuate racial stereotypes, misleading the public and providing a basis for the provocation of racist slander and behavior. For example, in Illinois there is a high school sports team called the Naperville Redskins. Their 1987 yearbook devoted an entire page to insulting American Indians. An article entitled "Eighty-Seven Uses for a Dead Redskin" listed such items as "maggot farm; doornat; red-skin rug; coat hanger; punching bag." The yearbook also included cartoons displaying an Indian man used as a rope in a tug-of-war, another tarred and feathered, and a third serving as a lamp stand with a lamp shade on his head. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "redskin" as "offensive slang"—the same phrase they use to define "nigger," "spic," "wop," and "kike." None of these terms would ever be used as a sports mascot or a team name. So why red-skin?

In 1992, the Illinois Board of Education decided the name Redskin had to be eliminated. In reaching this decision, the board examined school yearbooks dating back forty-five years, concluding: "Naperville Central High's yearbooks and other sources to which local school authorities have provided access [show that] over a period of at least forty-five years, the name 'redskins' has been used in that school in association with many insulting visual and verbal caricatures."

How would white Americans feel about having to send their children to a school called "Palefaces"? Imagine a place where the majority of students are people of color and the administration and staff encourage the active use of white images as mascots in all of their school events, i.e., homecoming, pep rallies, skits, yearbooks, athletic competition, etc. Imagine a picture of George Washington wearing knickers and a white-haired wig, sporting a silly grin with two front teeth missing, while holding a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other, emblazoned on the school

benign
safe; unlikely to
harm anyone

caricatures
distorted pictures;
exaggerations

desecration
disrespectful or
destructive treatment
of something sacred

walls, the gym floor, athletic jackets, jerseys, and the school yearbook. Imagine yourself attending a game with your family to watch your son or daughter compete while being surrounded by people of color, some with faces painted white in mockery of white people. I realize that it might be difficult for white Americans to empathize with this scenario because they have never experienced the centuries of racist persecution American Indians have, both as a group and on a personal level. As Phil would say, they can't know the pain because they've never felt it. Nevertheless, compassionate people should measure offensiveness from the viewpoint of those being offended, and not those doing the offending.

One part of the offensiveness is religious **desecration**. Both Indians and non-Indians have cultural and religious symbols that are important to them. Whites, for example, generally exhibit great respect for their national flags; witness the role of the flag in parades and in battle, and the furor that results when protesters try to burn the flag. Indians exhibit and demand similar respect for their special symbols, such as the eagle feather. In Indian culture, the headdress of eagle feathers was and continues to be reserved for our most revered and respected chiefs and spiritual leaders. Each feather is earned through a lifetime of service and sacrifice. The markings on the face are an important part of the spiritual ceremonies of most Indian nations, such as reaching adulthood, wedding ceremonies, and that time when one is returned to the bosom of Mother Earth and starts the spiritual journey into the spirit world. Our music is either social songs, prayer songs, or honor songs, all parts of a culture that is thousands of years old. Real headdresses can't be bought—they must be constructed one feather at a time, over a period of perhaps ten, twenty, or thirty years. Historically, a warrior who "counted coup," that is, spared an enemy when he could have destroyed him, might be rewarded with an eagle feather. To many Indian people, the eagle feather is comparable to the Congressional Medal of Honor.²

When a white person sees someone dancing in feathered costume, he sees innocent fun and wonders what is making

² Congressional Medal of Honor: one c

nation's highest civilian honors

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Indian people so upset. But when an Indian person sees the same scene, for example, the Atlanta Braves fans in headaddresses doing the tomahawk chop, he knows that the headaddresses and bustles aren't just ornamentation—they're parodies, mockeries of the greatest signs of respect tribe and family can bestow on a young man. The Indian reacts as the white man would react to someone burning the American flag.

Suppose a team such as the New Orleans "Saints" decided to include religious rituals in their half-time shows. For instance, could you imagine that whenever a touchdown is made the public address system and the organist break into a rendition of "Ave Maria" while cheering fans dressed as the Pope sprinkle holy water while toasting one another with chalices full of beer or wine? The Catholic church and the American public would be outraged.

What if the Cleveland "Indians" or the Atlanta "Braves" were called the Cleveland "Negroes" or the Atlanta "Cotton Pickers," whose fans are encouraged to cheer on their team by mimicking their idea of African Americans, painting their faces black and throwing balls of cotton in the air every time someone hits a home run? Or maybe they would dress in grass skirts and do the "Spear Chuck Romp" in place of the "Tomahawk Chop." Imagine the caricature of a black man's head, larger than life on the front of the stadium, with this same caricature plastered on millions of hats each year.

Of course these things do not happen in America—the very thought is repugnant. But recall the Cleveland Indians' moronically grinning, fire engine red caricature of a generic Injun, complete with triangular eyes, perpendicular cheek bones, and the enlarged proboscis, called, of all things, "Chief Wahoo." Why is it inconceivable to caricature any other ethnic group, yet somehow acceptable to demean the original people of this continent? In response to a letter sent to the Cleveland baseball organization by pastors and members of the United Church of Christ requesting that they discontinue use of the Indian mascot and logo, the Cleveland president responded:

I have reviewed your comments concerning the

chalices
drinking vessels,
especially those used
in religious ceremonies

repugnant
disgusting; offensive

proboscis
nose

Indians' long-standing club logo, Chief Wahoo. I am sure you realize, as do I, that there is much tradition in baseball, and certainly when the club logo was designed it was not designed with any intention of in any way being offensive to the Indians, or to demean them in any fashion. Now that it is almost a part of Cleveland tradition, we think it would be very difficult to change.

Following game two of the recent World Series in Minneapolis, and following a massive march and two days of protesting outside the Metrodome organized by the American Indian Movement (AIM),³ I decided to catch a bus to Atlanta and join a group of Indians protesting the Braves' use of an Indian logo and the "tomahawk chop" for game five of the World Series. I knew there might be trouble. Before I left Minneapolis, six Indian youths had been arrested after they confronted a group of about twenty Braves fans who were wearing Indian headaddresses and carrying foam tomahawks outside the stadium. There was shouting back and forth. Fans threw beer at the kids. The kids went after them and were arrested. Clyde Bellecourt, the AIM leader, compared the Braves fans' actions to "dressing up like Little Sambo⁴ and walking in the ghetto of Atlanta."

After taking my seat in center field, I turned around to see four police officers standing in the doorways to my left and right. Each time the fans would stand up and do the tomahawk chop, encouraged by the public address system, I would stand and lift my sign up above the tomahawks. My sign said, "Indians are a people, not mascots. We deserve respect." After a few innings I left my seat to make a phone call and walk the halls. I was followed by the police guard. When walking down the corridor someone spat at me. Upon stepping over legs when taking my seat someone in the crowd behind me yelled out, "Sit down, chief." I yelled back, "My name is Fred, not Chief." Around the fifth inning I realized the police guard had gone. A little later, I decided to

3 AIM: American Indian Movement, an organization dedicated to improving the power and status of Native Americans

4 Little Sambo: a character in a racist story

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take a stroll. As I walked through the corridor and around the stadium I discovered that there wasn't a barricade between the outfield and the infield ticket holders as there is in Minneapolis. I found myself directly behind home plate.

I said to myself, "I came to Atlanta to protest—well, here goes." After an usher had walked someone to their seat, I began a long walk down the stairway that ends up just behind the backstop. People booed, hissed, and yelled, "Get a job," "Hey chief," and "Get a haircut." When I reached the bottom of the staircase the usher told me I had to go back up and that I wasn't allowed down there. As I turned to walk back up, a group of about ten chicken-feathered tomahawk choppers came walking by. As they passed, I raised my sign to their tomahawks. One of them shoved me while another hit my sign with his six-foot tomahawk. The usher told me I could follow them out. I did. In the midst of all the hoopla, mockery, and ridicule, a black brother reached out his hand and gave me a high five.

As I walked through the city streets back to my hotel, the streets rang out with the sound of horns honking, Hollywood chants, and woo woo woo tomahawk chopping, and I had a feeling of loneliness in a city full of celebration. In reflecting upon my life, this was truly my worst nightmare. You know, in all the commotion and everything I didn't catch the score of the game. I asked a passerby: What was the score? He said, Braves won, Indians nothing. The following day I filed a complaint with the U.S. Justice Department Civil Rights Division.

Indian activists have also enlisted the help of Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell and a Minneapolis law firm to take action on two fronts. First, Senator Campbell introduced an amendment to the Stadium Act of 1957. The bill prohibited the use of the Washington, D.C., stadium by any person or organization exploiting racial or ethnic characteristics of Native Americans. Jack Kent Cooke, owner of the Washington Redskins, then simply took his team to another location. But, at the same time, a coalition of Native American leaders filed suit to remove federal trademark protection from the name "Washington Redskins." The legal basis for the action is a provision in federal trademark

disparaging
negative, condescending

pejorative
negative or belittling

insidious
harmful in a way
that may be hard
to detect or resist

law stating that federal trademark registrations cannot be issued for words that are "scandalous, immoral or disparaging." Because the word "redskin" is a derogatory term, we are arguing that patent registrations should never have been granted and should be canceled. The lawsuit is still pending, following several rulings in the Native Americans' favor. The court has already held that there is a "public policy" interest in addition to the interests of the Native American leaders. If we are successful, the Redskins lose exclusive ability to use their name on shirts, jackets, caps, banners, buttons, cups, or any other such item. It will have a tremendous negative economic impact on their organization and, we hope, will convince them that it is not worth it to keep a pejorative name for their team.

Our Indian ancestors were not savages. Their culture, their languages, and their spiritual ways reflected their connectedness to Mother Earth and the natural order of things—a tradition that present-day Indian people live by and pass on to our children, one rich in history, philosophy, and spirituality based upon hundreds of years living in this land now called U.S.A. We developed the idea of democracy, of checks and balances, and of government by the consent of the governed, hundreds of years before the colonials did. But the misguided negative stereotyping of which I have written erases all of this. Racism is an insidious disease. Not only does it affect amateur and professional sports and the institutions and organizations that continue to perpetuate this condition, it adversely affects all the American people, children and old alike.

LITERARY LENS

Has the author convinced you that Indians should not be used as team mascots?
Why or why not?

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