

NATIVE MASCOTS AND OTHER MISGUIDED BELIEFS

BY KEVIN GOVER

Editor's Note: The following editorial by director Kevin Gover appeared in *Indian Country Today* in response to the May 4 U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs hearing on "Stolen Identities: The Impact of Racist Stereotypes on Indigenous People."

Congress established the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989, noting that the establishment of the museum within the Smithsonian would "give all Americans the opportunity to learn of the cultural legacy, historical grandeur, and contemporary culture of Native Americans." For the last twenty-two years, the NMAI has worked to create that opportunity not just for all Americans, but for visitors from throughout the world.

When we engage our visitors, we are not writing on a blank slate. To the contrary, most visitors, whether Native or non-Native, come to the museum carrying information, misinformation, ideas, attitudes and prejudices (both negative and positive) based in what they have learned about American Indians in the course of their lives. Only a very small percentage of the population has devoted extensive study to Native history, art, and culture, so their understandings are formed based on the limited information they have received from two sources: the formal

education system in the United States and the popular media culture in the United States.

I speak here from my own experience contending with the information I was given while growing up in Oklahoma, a state with a considerable number of Indian people. Native history and culture was only rarely touched upon while I was in elementary school and junior high school. Though I had, of course, more than the usual interest in these subjects, I can recall only the occasional reference to American Indians, almost always accompanied by a photo of Indian people standing on a rocky hillside bedecked in feathers and buckskin. I learned nothing about the history of Native people prior to contact with Europeans, save the pages in my Oklahoma history book dedicated to the Spiro Mounds, a Caddoan-Mississippian archaeological site in eastern Oklahoma. It was as though what pre-existed Columbus's arrival in America was uninteresting and unimportant.

Like most young people of my generation, I absorbed an odd set of information about Native history after contact with Europeans. In grade school I learned that "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. He sailed, and sailed, and sailed, and sailed to find this land for me and you." I learned of the friendly Indian Squanto who





Director Kevin Gover next to an exhibition banner on Geronimo at the Oneida Nation's Shako:wi Cultural Center May 11, just days after President Obama revealed to the nation that Geronimo was the code name for Bin Ladin in the U.S. Navy SEAL raid on his compound.

PHOTO BY MARIJU LOPEZ FRETTS

DIRECTOR'S LETTER [CONTINUED]

taught the Pilgrims to grow corn; of the Indian princess Pocahontas who saved Captain John Smith from death at the hands of her evil father; of Sacajawea, the intrepid “squaw” who guided Lewis and Clark through the Rocky Mountains; of the massacre of the gallant General Custer by savage Sioux at Little Big Horn.

Things improved somewhat in junior high school, where we did learn that all of Oklahoma had once been designated Indian Territory and of the removal of the “Five Civilized Tribes” from their homes in the southeast. But we moved quickly on to more important matters such as the land rushes, the discovery of oil, the establishment of Oklahoma Territory and the entry of Oklahoma as the forty-sixth state. I don't recall being told that all of this involved the abrogation of treaty promises that Oklahoma would belong to Indians forever.

Meanwhile, at the movies and on television, westerns were thriving. Even while knowing these stories were fictional, they wore on me. The Indians were semi-naked, mono-syllabic and fierce (quite unlike the many Indians I knew as family and friends). The white people were smart, ethi-

cal (the heroes, anyway) and only reluctant users of violence. The racial message was consistent and powerful: Indians were stupid and violent, though oddly noble in their savagery, and white people were civilized, principled and heroic.

This brings us to Indian mascots. I loved sports, playing them and watching them. I noticed at a young age that professional football teams in Washington and Kansas City and professional baseball teams in Cleveland and Atlanta used Indian references as their nicknames and images of spears, war clubs, arrowheads and the like on their uniforms. They even used in some cases caricatured or stereotyped images of Indian people on their helmets and jerseys. Atlanta even had an Indian mascot who would emerge from his tipi to celebrate in dance each home run by the team. This did strike me as odd, because I noted that no other existing racial group qualified for this role, and that none of the athletes on these teams were actually Indians.

Enjoying college sports as I did and still do, I also noted the widespread use of Native images and references, including mascots, as college sports symbols. Indeed, the University

of Oklahoma had its own Indian mascot, Little Red. I spent my junior high years in Norman, and of course was a fan of the university's sports teams. When the football team scored a touchdown, Little Red, decked out in feathers matching the team colors, would “Indian dance” exuberantly for the cheering crowd. To its credit, the University of Oklahoma long ago abandoned the Little Red mascot. The team was, after all, nicknamed the “Sooners,” in honor of people who broke the rules of the land runs by entering the Indian lands opened to white settlement before the appointed hour.

Taken together, the messages my generation received from our formal education and the popular culture were clear. Indians were interesting only in terms of their engagement with non-Indians. A good Indian was one who assisted white people in establishing civilization in the American wilderness. Native women were especially likely to see the virtues of white civilizers and assist them in their efforts. Native men, being violent and dim, resisted civilization ferociously but futilely. Above all perhaps, contemporary Indians were not relevant. Indians

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were figures of the past. It would be entirely fair for a non-Indian student in, say, Ohio to conclude that Indians simply ceased to exist. This is a powerful set of ideas being delivered over and over that made growing up as an Indian child harder than it had to be.

As an older student and as an adult, I made a point of learning more about Native history and culture, and came to understand the enormity of the omissions and misrepresentations about Native people that continue too often unchallenged in the educational system and culture of the United States. Some things have changed. Certainly the mythological heroism of Columbus and Custer has been challenged in both the popular culture and in modern scholarship. Most people acknowledge the absurdity of Columbus “discovering” a world that had been occupied for millennia. Recent treatments of Custer reveal him as a flawed hero, at best.

On the other hand, certain myths persist and are reinforced. Disney’s animated version of Pocahontas celebrates the Indian-princess-helping-white-people-bring-civilization story of old. Even the movies in which Indians are heroes too often engage in the old stereotypes. The large blue Indians of the movie *Avatar* and the Indian werewolves of the popular *Twilight* series may behave as heroes, but note the spectacular violence of which they are capable in these movies. Note as well the addition of new stereotypes that evolved in the late twentieth century: Indians as pristine environmentalists and, even better, magic Indians.

Further, these characters represent Indians of the past. Television, movies and books almost never portray Indians as contemporary characters. We are confined to the past, as though the government’s policies directed toward the deconstruction of Native nations had succeeded universally. The practice of using Native people as mascots largely emerged at the very time government policy was to deliberately destroy Native language, Native religion and Native identity. In this respect, the mascots served very directly the government’s purpose by portraying Indians as a proud and noble figure, but only a figure of the past. Government policy and the popular culture assumed that, certainly by the end of the twentieth century, there would be no more Indians.

These policies find their roots in the misguided beliefs of the nineteenth century in racial hierarchy and the ranking of cultures from primitive to civilized. It hardly bears noting that the so-called “science” of race in the nineteenth century always concluded that white people,

“Anglo-Saxon” or “Nordic” white people in particular, were the pinnacle of human development and their civilizations were the best ever achieved. This foolishness has long since been discredited as simple racism, as have the policy ideas that arose from it. The popular culture, however, has kept alive the “vanishing red man” stereotype that is at the foundation of the phenomenon of Native mascots.

The celebrations of our extinction turned out, of course, to have been premature. However, certain ideas and themes in the popular culture remain persistent and influential. Native mascots are primary offenders in perpetuating these stereotypes. Consider why a franchise or university might choose a Native image to represent its team or teams. We are told that they are meant to honor Native American qualities such as bravery, strength (physical, not mental), endurance and pride. Certainly Native people had and have those qualities in varying degrees, though I do not believe that they had or have them in greater quantity than other peoples. And why is it that Native people are not chosen to represent positive human qualities such as intelligence, piety, generosity and love of family? I suppose the

answer is that we are far less interesting to mascot makers when revealed to be ordinary human beings, with all the virtues and failures of other human beings.

At the National Museum of the American Indian, we address a public that has been deeply influenced by the failings of formal education and the misinformation imbedded in the popular culture. The existence of Native American mascots is partly responsible for this misinformation. Mascots stereotype Native people employing imagery and ideas that arose from the racism of the nineteenth century. We relish the opportunity to challenge these stereotypes with the authority of the Smithsonian Institution. We are very grateful for the one and a half million visitors who choose to come to our museum each year, an expression of their willingness to learn and move beyond the stereotypes that they have been taught. And we are grateful to the Congress, the Native nations and the Indian and non-Indian people who support the museum for creating the opportunity to learn and teach at the National Museum of the American Indian. ✨

Kevin Gover (Pawnee) is director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

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Clockwise from upper left: Seymour Tuzroyluke, Sr. (Inupiat), Hilb Sabin, Denise VWallace (Chugach?Aluet), Theresa Neptune Gardner (Passamaquoddy), Kooyoo Peter (Inuit), Derrick Gordon (Navajo).

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