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3.4 ARGUING OVER IMAGES: NATIVE AMERICAN MASCOTS AND RACE

C. Richard King

The author claims that arguments about Native American mascots (such as the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo) are actually arguments about race, and hence a barometer of race relations in our society. To see these arguments in action, he analyzed statements USA Weekend audiences posted in response to a web poll asking, "What is your opinion about changing a sports team's mascot because it offends Native Americans?"

Before reading this essay, see the first "It's Your Turn" activity.

Native American mascots, once accepted icons, have become controversial symbols over the past quarter century. Increasingly, they raise troubling questions. Does the continued use of American Indian symbols and nicknames in sports honor or insult Native Americans? Do mascots like Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians and Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois perpetuate racist stereotypes? Does it matter whether the Washington Redskins team name is intentionally offensive or merely that it happens to offend many Native Americans? Answers to these queries have much to tell us about race. Indeed argu-

ments over Native American mascots are ultimately arguments about race. In obvious and invisible ways, critics and defenders invariably speak about race relations and ethnic identity when they speak about the use of Indian nicknames and images in sports.

An impressive literature has emerged discussing the racial politics of Native American mascots (see Churchill, 1994, especially pages 65–72; Connolly, 2000; Davis, 1993; King & Springwood, 2001; Pewewardy, 1991; Spindel, 2000; Vanderford, 1996). It directs our attention to the ways individuals understand and construct race: *identity*, or how they imagine themselves; *imagination*, or how they perceive others; and *representation*, or how they give life to social categories (such as bravery, physicality, and masculinity) through cultural difference. Scholars and activists have contended that the creation and more recent contentiousness of mascots illuminates the stereotypical images central to Whites' interpretations of Native Americans, the centrality of Indianness to the formulation of Whiteness in the United States, and the changing place of Native Americans in American society.

In what follows, building on these discussions, I will not trace the evolution of specific mascots, nor unpack the meaning of Indian imagery. Rather, after a brief overview of some of the common stereotypes, I propose to make sense of mascots by listening to the unfolding dialogues about these sports symbols in an effort to grasp the place of race in popular interpretations of them. Moreover, to hear the positions advanced in these debates most clearly, I avoid rehearsed defenses, press releases, and official accounts orchestrated by institutions; instead, I concentrate on the ways in which citizens, consumers, and fans interpret Native American nicknames and symbols. Throughout, I make sense of how media consumers talk about Indians images in sports, asking what arguments do they advance to defend and criticize mascots.

Although elsewhere I have openly criticized mascots (see Springwood & King, 2001), here, I want to step back and analyze the positions of supporters and opponents. I focus my attention on one representative case, an electronic forum hosted by *USA Weekend* in 1997. After briefly reviewing the historical uses of Indian symbols and nicknames in American athletics, I detail the various arguments. On this foundation, I touch on the implications of the mascot controversy for our understanding of race and the media.

Background

For much of the past century, Indian symbols and nicknames have been a common, if increasingly contested, part of American sports. Today, numerous secondary schools across the country, more than 80 colleges and universities, and dozens of professional and semi-professional sports teams have Native American mascots. The origins, popularity, and problems posed by these athletic icons offers a useful foundation for a fuller consideration of ongoing arguments about them.

Euro-Americans have selected and supported Native American mascots for a number of reasons. Some schools, such as Dartmouth College, have historically defined themselves through a specific relationship with American Indians. More often, especially at public universities, regional history and local pride have inspired students, coaches, and administrators to adopt Indian mascots. The University of Utah Running Utes and the University of Illinois Fighting Illini are two prominent examples of this tradition. Elsewhere, historical accident, coincidence, or circumstance gave rise to mascots. For instance, St. John's University was known as the Redmen initially because their uniforms were all red, and only later did fans and alumni create fuller traditions of playing Indian.

Whatever the specific origins of individual icons, Euro-Americans were able to fabricate Native Americans as mascots precisely because of prevailing sociohistorical conditions. That is, a set of social relations and cultural categories made it possible, pleasurable, and powerful for Euro-Americans to elaborate images of Indians in athletic contexts. First, Euro-Americans have always fashioned individual and collective identities for themselves by playing Indian. Native American mascots were an extension of this long tradition (DeLoria, 1998). Second, the conquest of Native America simultaneously empowered Euro-Americans to appropriate, invent, and otherwise represent Native Americans and to long for aspects of indigenous cultures destroyed by conquest. Third, with the rise of public culture, the production of Indianness in spectacles, exhibitions, and other sundry entertainments proliferated, offering templates for elaborations in sporting contexts.

Given this history it is not surprising that Native American mascots have relied on stereotypical images of Indians. Accentuating physical features (nose, skin color, hair), material culture (buckskin, feathers, headdress), expressive forms (dance, face painting) or other attributes (stoicism, bravery) associated with the native nations of North America, they reduce past and present Native Americans to well-worn clichés derived from dime novels, Wild West shows, movies, scouting, and advertising. More often than not, such renderings have more to do with Euro-American interpretations and preoccupations than with indigenous cultures. Indian imagery in sport tends to be frozen in the past (romanticized representatives from a golden age), cluster around the peoples of Plains (the Lakota and other nomadic horse cultures principally), and allude to, if not emphasize, cultural conflicts between Euro- and Native Americans. In the process, generic Indians emerge, which cannot be faithful to native histories and tradition, precisely because their invention depends on decontextualization. These invented Indians that dance at half-time, mark the stationery of educational institutions, and appear on baseball caps and T-shirts are of two types: the warrior and the clown, mirroring the historic bifurcation of indigenous people into two types of savages—noble and ignoble. The *warrior* aspires to honor. Stressing bravery and belliosity, the warrior exudes character traits Euro-Americans have long prized: individuality, perseverance, pride, fidelity, and excellence. Numerous high schools, colleges, and professional teams have seized upon the warrior, real (Chief Osecola at Florida State University) and imagined (Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois). In contrast, the less common *clown* mocks, making Indians a joke, a sideshow burlesque. The Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo is perhaps the most recognizable clown. (For a fuller discussion of the portrayal of Native Americans, see King & Springwood, 2001; Pewewardy, 1991; and Spindel, 2000.)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the imagery associated with them, Native American mascots have become increasingly contentious. More than three decades ago, amid the civil rights movement and a cultural resurgence throughout Native America, Indians began questioning mascots, forcing both Dartmouth College and Stanford University to change their mascots. More recently, while some institutions, including St. John's University and the University of Miami (Ohio), have *retired* their mascots, a smaller number, including the University of Utah and Bradley University, have *revised* their use of imagery. Other schools without Native American mascots, such as the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota, have instituted policies prohibiting their athletic departments from scheduling games against institutions with Indian mascots. At the same time, countless communities and boards of education have confronted the issue. Many have deemed such mascots to be discriminatory, requiring (as did the Minnesota and New York State Boards of Education and

the Los Angeles and Dallas School Districts) that schools change them. In the wake of these events, numerous individuals and organizations have challenged the persistence of such icons. Nationally, numerous organizations, ranging from the National Congress of American Indians and the National Education Association to the United Methodist Church and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, have taken positions against the continued use of Indian images in sports. Finally, the media have taken a leading role in modifying public perceptions of mascots, as when the *Portland Oregonian* changed its editorial policy and refused to print derogatory team names.

Arguments

In July 1997, the *USA Weekend* web site (http://www.usaweekend.com/quick/results/chief_wahoo_qp_results.html) asked its visitors, "What is your opinion about changing a sports team's mascot because it offends Native Americans?" Visitors could vote in support of changing or keeping such mascots and submit a reaction to the ongoing controversy. Of those who came to the site, 2,419 participated in the quick poll, with 42% voting to change and 58% voting to retain mascots. In turn, 299 visitors (124 opponents and 175 supporters) offered a fuller opinion. These opinions form the basis of my analysis. The comments will be reproduced exactly as they were written, typos and all, and people are identified here the same way they identified themselves online.

In Defense of Mascots. Supporters of mascots offer a number of interconnected arguments that collectively labor to make such images acceptable and to defuse the controversy. They stress respect, intention, fairness, and commonsense notions of symbols, play, and politics.

To many who support mascots, the use of Native American symbols and nicknames honors Indians. Michelle from College Station, Texas, gave clear voice to this perspective: "Team mascots are adopted to reflect positively on a team, to symbolize an image of bravery, agility, tenacity, and strength. Native Americans should view this as a compliment rather than an insult." Likewise, A. McClung suggests, "The naming of teams . . . whether it be Braves, Warriors, Indians, Cherokees, etc. have been a thing of honor, prestige and recognition . . . [It] conjures up images that are in my opinion, positive and wholesome to our Native Americans." And Bob Dunwoody asserted, "Native Americans or American Indians whatever they wish to be know as today should be PROUD that they have been selected as a name because it their ancestors Pride, Honor, Bravery, and Physical Prowess and Endurance." More hypothetically, Rick Bartholomew, a staunch Cleveland fan, remarks, "If I was an Indian, I would be as proud as pie to have a team named after my heritage." And, Bee from Maine exclaims "YOU PEOPLE SHOULD LIGHTEN UP!!!!!!!!!!!!!! IT'S JUST THE NAME OF A BASEBALL TEAM. IT'S NOT EVEN MAKING FUN OF NATIVE AMERICANS. THEY SHOULD TAKE IT AS A COMPLIMENT." Finally, Jimmy Conan overtly mixes insult and honor, "I feel that native americans should take it as a compliment and have better things to complain about like america being stolen from them, but i guess alcohol does bad things to your train of thought."

Supporters often couple arguments about honor and respect with discussions of intentionality. Scott from Port Huron, Michigan, succinctly presents this position: "I DON'T

THINK THE NAMES WERE MEANT TO HURT ANYONE. THEY WERE PICKED OUT RESPECT IF ANYTHING." Similarly, Hector Cadena notes, "If the team nicknames were meant to intentionally be derogatory, then I could understand someone taking umbrage with them. But in reality, the names are meant as a salute to the fierceness and bravery." And according to Terri McDowell, "PEOPLE NEED TO FIND BETTER THINGS TO DO WITH THEIR TIME! THESE NAMES WEREN'T MEANT TO BE OBJECTIONABLE."

Arguments in support of mascots on occasion speak about race through analogies between Native Americans and other ethnic groups. Many, like Betty from Albert Lea, Minnesota, are proud to see "their heritage" displayed in an athletic context: "I am Norwegian. I am happy to have the Vikings use this Scandinavian heritage as their team name." Jon from Apple Creek, Ohio, wonders, "Why isn't someone complaining about Notre Dame?" Similarly, Jenni from South Dakota asks, "My husband's family is of Norwegian heritage. Does this mean we should start a campaign to dump the Vikings?" Perhaps, she continues, those offended "should consider the advantages of the perpetual mass marketing campaign that rides along with these mascots . . . It isn't all bad!" Kim Stevens encourages critics "to lighten up. Don't take things so personal. Scandanvian people aren't up in arms about Minnesota using the name 'Vikings' . . . Take it with a grain of salt."

Many defenders of mascots like Terri McDowell and Bee from Maine cannot grasp the importance of mascots and resort to dismissive comments. They dub it "silliness" or "a waste of time" because other problems (usually unnamed) deserve attention. They encourage detractors to "lighten up," "to get over it," "to grow up," "to get a life," "to get a grip," "to get real." In part, this derives from a collective sense of sport as playful, frivolous diversion. As Ralph W. Sullivan asserts, "Sports is entertainment, anybody who takes it seriously enough to get upset over a name, a score, or whose on first needs help. How about putting first things first. There are other priorities." Moreover, this refusal to take mascot seriously arises from a folk understanding of symbols. Richard from Salem, Oregon, argues against changing the nicknames because "After all, it is just a name!" And Brookie from Birmingham, Alabama, does not understand "what the big deal is . . . A name is just a name, nothing else."

Not all arguments in support of mascots lean on honor, intention, or analogy. In fact, some proudly flaunt their intolerance, overtly advancing racist claims. Rick from Las Vegas opined, "The native Americans are mostly peaceable. Some need to be reminded who won the wars." And Bill Smith from El Paso added, "I tend to think that all of this noise about mascots offending certain groups of peoples is taking up valuable time and effort that could be directed at solving important issues. And besides the Indians lost the war and therefore it is our right to make fun of them (at least we give them welfare and a place to live)."

Taken together, arguments in defense of mascots take five key positions. First, they refuse to engage or take seriously the concerns of living Native Americans in their defenses of "their" imagined Indians. Second, they exhibit a propensity to tell Native Americans how it is or how they should feel (namely respected and honored). Third, their arguments question the grounding of critics, enjoining them to "get real" or "get a life," precisely as they infantilize them through demands that opponents "grow up." Fourth, supporters display an inability and unwillingness to see or talk about race. Moreover, when race does enter into their discussions, they qualify and constrain it. On the one hand, they suggest that racism is meaningful only when it is intentional, guided by ill-will, and truly significant (that is, in

the real world). On the other hand, many supporters claim parity between their ethnic heritage and racial condition and that of Native Americans, arguing that Irishness, for instance, is equivalent to Indianness in terms of the privileges, possibilities, and histories.

In Opposition to Mascots. Opponents of mascots advance a set of overlapping arguments. Throughout, they foreground race, history, and power.

Not surprisingly, opponents of mascots devote great energy to challenging the arguments advanced in defense of such symbols and nicknames. In the *USA Weekend* forum, opponents frequently underscored the ignorance of supporters. In playful and pejorative terms, they questioned supporters' familiarity with Native American cultures and their knowledge of American history and the English language. With almost equal frequency, opponents dispute assertions that mascots honor Native Americans. Jay Rosenstein asks, "Why do people continue to insist these nicknames honor American Indians when the people you claim to be honoring tell that it's not? You honor and respect someone by listening to them." Jim Northrup, an Anishinaabe, has never felt honored by mascots; and more, he continues, "Someone telling me I should feel honored does not feel the same as being honored." As Arek Dreyer suggests, "It is pretty arrogant to dictate what someone else should be honored by."

Arguments against mascots pivot around race. Some note with sadness that Native Americans still lack parity with other ethnic groups. Elaine Flattery remarks, "Other races simply aren't subjected to this sort of racial stereotype propaganda. Native American images and names should not be the 'property' of corporate American exploit and merchandise." Similarly, Beth from Alstead, New Hampshire, argues, "The fact that caricatures of American Indian people exist with the consent from white people means that the race isn't take seriously in this country and they are being 'used' for the entertainment and contrived message that white people get from them. You don't see these kinds of mascots of other races . . . Because American Indian Nations have been stuffed into third world roles for the past three centuries, they are being denied the voice to have white America listen to them." Others question the racial content of names and symbols. "Using Native Americans as mascots," Danielle N'Dhighe asserts, "is racist and should be stopped immediately. After all we don't see teams like the Washington Blackskins . . . or the San Francisco Slant Eyes. Almost everyone would agree that such things would be racist and denigrating. Why then do we allow Redskins and Chief Wahoo?" And John Whalen asks, "How can 'redskins' be interpreted as anything other than blatant racism? How can any ridiculous caricature such as Chief Wahoo be seen as anything other than demeaning?"

Opponents of mascots do not simply highlight racism, they also actively strive to make the racial content of mascots tangible, linking them to more palpable and familiar version of race. For some, the historic tradition of Blackface is a striking parallel. Nota Bell, for instance, finds mascots "no less distasteful than shuck & jive antics in black face is to Black Americans." More commonly, opponents offer racial analogies, comparing Native Americans with other racial groups. Frequently, they invent new and intentionally provocative team names. These include "New York Niggers," "Jersey Jewboys," "Washington Wops," "Mississippi Blackies," "Atlanta Rednecks," "Washington Palefaces," "Los Angeles Spics," "Chicago Pollacks," and "Cleveland Honkies."

In contrast with supporters, opponents of mascots stress history and power, situating nicknames and symbols in a broader context of oppression. Dolores Jones, for instance,

suggests, "Native Americans have always been oppressed peoples . . . They DESERVE some RESPECT!!! What is being done by sports teams is mockery." Eric Anderson, in turn, asserts, "This whole deal is a 'controversy' only because non-Natives with power continue to show disrespect for Native peoples and cultures. You might think that five hundred years of genocide has been enough, but corporate greed and the longstanding tradition of racism in America just won't let go. If Native peoples are offended by these mascots—and they are—then the mascots should be changed. It is a matter of courtesy and respect." Likewise, Bolaji from Pasadena, California, laments that "the past of the USA continues to haunt it." Despite heartfelt claims to honor or respect indigenous peoples through mascots, he continues, "the bloodiness and hate of the country's history inevitably taints whatever good intentions there might be in [these] positive gestures." A. T. Lang pushes this thinking even further: "The problem with this country now and in the past is they want to sweep 'THE INDIAN ISSUE' UNDER THE RUG! Over 60 million Indians were slaughtered, raped, enslaved, and [had] their land stolen. The 'Indian Holocaust' was one of the cornerstones behind Hitler's slaughter of 6 million Jews. It is long past due for this country to show respect for the rights of the FIRST AMERICANS. That includes not using them for 'mascots' AND NOT sweeping Indian issues under the rug any longer!!!!" Undoing this history and respecting Native Americans as equals, Andrew Jackson concludes, demands not only that mascots be retired but also that "THIS COUNTRY HONOR THE TREATIES THAT WERE SIGNED WITH THE NATIVE PEOPLES."

Arguments advanced against Native American mascots display four key features. First, they overtly engage with and challenge supporters' knowledge and understanding. Second, they direct attention to race and its effects. Third, they actively racialize the debate over mascots, making analogies between the experience and condition of Native Americans and those of other racial groups, particularly African Americans. Fourth, they historicize the use of American Indian nicknames and symbols, connecting them with broader patterns of discrimination and oppression.

Interpretation of the Arguments

The arguments over the continued use of American Indian nicknames and symbols have much to teach us about race and the media. They remind us of the creativity and situated agency of media consumers. Texts, images, and performances do not have fixed meanings but rather audiences actively interpret them, negotiating and literally creating their significance. Moreover, the critique and defense of mascots, along with the efforts (successful or not) to retire and retain them, underscore that these processes are not singular. Rather, audiences struggle with one another, and often with social institutions, including the media, to give meaning to signs (mascots), their worlds of experience and collective heritage (identity), and their positions, perspectives, and possibilities.

Supporters and defenders of mascots clearly disagree about the significance of mascots. Whereas supporters insist that mascots foster respect and are meant to honor Native Americans, opponents assert that they denigrate Native Americans, perpetuating historical patterns of discrimination and dispossession. The distinct positions advanced in the unfolding debates point to deeper differences: supporters stress text (honor and intention), while opponents emphasize context (history and racism). Supporters isolate; opponents

make connections. Supporters argue for intent; opponents argue for effect. Supporters consider symbols and names flat and more or less unimportant; opponents think of symbols as powerful cultural forms that reflect social relations and reinforce historical inequalities. Supporters deflect and deny the import of race; opponents highlight the centrality of race.

In effect, supporters and opponents occupy what Prochaska (2001, p. 175) dubbed “mutually exclusive communicative communities” informed by distinct interpretive frameworks. To my mind, something fundamental is discernible in the arguments advanced and their “communities” of origin. That is, they advance competing visions of race. Supporters, who might be described as advocates of a more or less dominant, if not reactionary, notion, hold that “we are all more or less equal,” that the ill intentions of prejudiced individuals produce racism, and that discussions of discrimination should be confined to “real” and “important” social domains. In contrast, opponents advance an emergent, counter-hegemonic perspective—that is, an interpretation reading the social relations and cultural categories against the grain, exposing the power and meaning embedded within accepted norms, ideologies, and behaviors. Opponents argue that race and racism are central to the American experience, that the effects of racial hierarchy cannot be ignored, and that symbols such as mascots—far from being frivolous—are significant measures of race relations. In this light, the ongoing controversy over mascots is as much about conflicting interpretations of race as it is a series of arguments over the appropriateness of Native American images in popular culture.

IT'S YOUR TURN: WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

1. Before reading this essay, write down every word, image, or sentiment that comes to mind when thinking about Native American mascots (e.g., the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo, the University of Illinois's Chief Illiniwek, or the Washington Redskins). Then, after reading the essay, individually analyze your earlier responses. As a class, identify and interpret themes and patterns that emerged from this exercise.
2. Compare and contrast mascots that represent ethnic groups. How is using names such as the Vikings or Fighting Irish like or unlike using names such as the Redskins, Savages, and Fighting Illini? What do these differences suggest about how Americans have understood race and ethnicity? What do they tell us about racial identity, privilege, and relations in the contemporary United States?
3. Why are there no African American mascots? What does the prevalence of Indian symbols

and nicknames paired with the absence of Black symbols and nicknames suggest about ethnic identity, racial stereotyping, and respect?

4. Visit one of the following web sites. Study the tone, presentation, arguments, content, and effectiveness. Think critically about how the authors talk about mascots, Native Americans, race, symbols, and history. Consider, moreover, how they use the electronic medium and what the web site suggests about audience involvement in cultural politics. To foster greater insight, visit one site in support and one site in opposition to mascots.

PRO: <http://www.savethechief.com/> or <http://www.savemonty.org/>

CON: <http://members.tripod.com/earnest-man/lindexpage.htm> or <http://www.jerrydj.com/Racism/> or <http://www.ivchildren.org/500yearhatecrime.htm>