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Native American Names and Symbols

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It would seem that we are living in an Age when any major event becomes the occasion for some group or another to grind their proverbial political axe. Sometimes the grinding hits a responsive chord, but at other times it has the effect of fingernails on the blackboard.

This year's politically incorrect World Series has attracted protest from a large number of supporters of Native American advocacy groups. The object of the protest has been the alleged denigration of Indians and Indian culture by the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland Indians.

This is not a new issue. It has been on the American Indian Movement agenda since the early Seventies. There was an initial rush by high schools and some universities to drop the Indian theme, but no professional sports franchise has seen fit to take action. And in recent years even more schools have made the change.

Let me say I understand the argument against the use of Indians and their cultural symbols for sports teams. And let me say also that I respect the notion that if this offends large numbers of people, then it should be, as a matter of human courtesy, dropped. If however this is simply the rallying call for marginal advocacy groups, there should be no rush to change.

Why, it should be asked, do sports teams use the Indian and aspects of Indian culture, as symbols? What do these symbols mean? What do they signify?

From the beginning of European settlement in North America there has been a great deal of ambivalence in the European community toward Native Americans. There has been conflict, there has been friendship, there has been arrogance. Europeans clearly took the position that they came from a superior culture, and that they had much to teach the natives whom they regarded as savage and primitive. At the same time Europeans were attracted to the Indian culture, its harmony with nature, and the ability of the natives to live happily on the land. Many early settlers left the European community and joined Indian communities attracted by a superior way of life. Europeans came to both admire and fear the tenacity and the bravery of the Indian, and they borrowed heavily from the Indian for survival. But in the end,

the European saw the Indian as a part of the American Wilderness, to be transformed or overcome.

But always, despite the slaughter and the conflict, the genocidal tendencies, there was an admiration that would not, and indeed could not, die. Historian Winthrop Jordan has shown that unlike the African, whom the European degraded without the blinking of an eye and who was pushed to the edge of the human family, the Indian was admired as a member of an ancient civilization. Thomas Jefferson and others spent much time and effort in the study of the Indian. Jefferson, being most interested in Indian languages, did his best to catalogue and preserve them. Although willing to admit the inferiority of Blacks, Jefferson tenaciously defended the Indian against any such assessment. The Indian was part of America, and to degrade the Indian would be to degrade America. He was a symbol, and an important one, of the meaning of America itself.

It is no accident, says Jordan, that the Indian has been found on American coinage. He was part of and a product of the American environment. He was a symbol of strength and courage. He may have been regarded by some as a savage, as a threat, as something out there to fear, but he was also the noble savage. There are no comparable images and attitudes that the Europeans held toward the Africans.

Many have asked why there is no team called the Atlanta Blacks, no Cleveland Afro-Americans, no Washington BlackSkins. The answer is simple. There is no such team, and there are no such symbols, because the Euro-American society does not value Blacks and Black culture, has historically denied the very existence of Black culture, and therefore does not seek to emulate that culture nor borrow symbols from it.

But the Euro-American does admire the Indian. The tomahawk, the Brave, the Indian chief and headdress, are all symbols with positive connotations: Bravery, tenacity, courage, pride, strength. These symbols are not chosen to degrade anyone. These are positive signs of admiration, not negative terms of degradation. When the yuppie executive dresses up in what he thinks is Indian garb, he is not trying to make fun of anyone. He is trying to appropriate the admirable qualities he sees in the Indian for himself and his team. When Braves fans do the tomahawk chop, they are not trying to caricature anyone. They are trying to invoke the symbolic power of the tomahawk on behalf of their not always powerful baseball team.

Symbols are important, and that is why people feel they have a stake in them. And some symbols are powerful and that is why they are borrowed. Don't confuse admiration and emulation with denigration.

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