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Native American Mascot Issue

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
October 24, 1991

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 version of the World Series has attracted a political protest from the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the object of the protest has been the alleged denigration of Indians and Indian culture by the Atlanta Braves and their followers. Braves fans, who have suffered humiliation for so long, must wonder why, now at the moment of their glory, someone has to come along and rain on the parade. Why pick on us? Why now?

But AIM will be excused for striking at the optimum moment. This is not a new issue. It has been on the AIM agenda since the early Seventies, but has faded from view in recent years. There was an initial rush by high schools and at least one major university to drop the Indian theme, but no professional sports franchise has seen fit to take action. And so with the success of the Braves and their tomahawk chop, it was an excellent time to raise the issue again.

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. But as of yet I am not convinced that wide-spread opposition exists. In this case I think there is a misunderstanding and a mistake being made by those who speak for the American Indian.

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 the 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 they had much to teach the natives, who they regarded as savage and primitive. At the same time Europeans were attracted to the

Indian culture, to the harmony with nature, to 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. The Europeans came also to 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. 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 that the Indian is to be 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.

In this current controversy the leaders of AIM ask why there is no team called the Atlanta Blacks, no Cleveland Negroes, no Washington Black Skins. 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 carrying positive characteristics: Bravery, tenacity, courage, pride, strength. These symbols are not chosen to make fun, or 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.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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