

TEN REASONS TO RETIRE THE CHIEF

#4. The Wrong Choice: The Chief is a Racist Symbol

This isn't the image the University should show the world

By the Editor, *RetireTheChief*

Racism, *n.* 1. the idea that one's own race is superior. 2. a policy or practice based on such an idea. 3. discriminatory or abusive behavior towards members of another race.

Institutionalized racism, *n.* Racism that has become part of the normal behavior of people within an organization.¹

Chief Illiniwek is a racist symbol.

What? A bit harsh, perhaps? No, not really.

There are several obstacles that stand in the way of acknowledging that the Chief is, in fact, racist. The first is what is often meant by racism, and how that definition has overlooked the Chief. Another is blindness to racism around us. And, finally, how something can be racist without intending that it be so.

We have a severe reaction to the "R" word. One study found that not only was racism one of "the major barriers to improving communications," but use of the word racism "seemed to disable dialogue between the American Indian and non-Indian participants."²

The suggestion that we are - or are associated with something that is - racist is offensive. But note our narrow interpretation, e.g. "racism is not considered racism unless it wears a hood and burns a cross." Extreme definitions have a purpose: it lets us off the hook. Author David Shipler points out mainstream Americans "are quite generous in giving themselves the benefit of the doubt."³

Some say those with European roots think differently about race. Those who "don't identify strongly with any ethnic group ... tend to take race for granted or view it as somehow irrelevant," according to Yale professor Harlon Dalton, who concludes "the inability or unwillingness of many white people to think of themselves in racial terms ... produces huge blind spots."⁴ (continued)



✓ Reality Check

← U.I. Department of Psychology. The Psychology graduate program is ranked 3rd nationally.

The University is not about the Chief. It is about excellence & leadership in teaching, research and athletics.

"We meant no harm"

How can something - or someone - be racist without actively trying? Harm can be done by stereotypical language and imagery. Author Cornel Pewewardy: "to further understand why this is racist, consider how euphemisms and code words for ethnic persons and groups are used: scalp, massacre, redskin, squaw, noble savage, papoose, Pocahontas ... " As a result of such language, "Indigenous peoples are dehumanized by society at large."⁵ In another example, Blacks and Asian-Americans speaking standard English "are often praised unduly for how well we speak."⁶ The underlying assumption is all too clear.

Racism "threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype."⁷

"Racism isn't born, folks, it's taught. I have a two-year-old son. You know what he hates? Naps! End of list." - Dennis Leary

One mixed-race young (24 year old) man commented on the dirty looks his sister - who has much darker skin - receives. "To them, she was just an Indian ... all they knew were labels and stereotypes, not her."⁸

From a sixteen-year-old girl: "I think there's still racism everywhere. It's not as outwardly noticeable as it once was; there are not as many crosses burning in people's yards. But it's still there - a lot of it is institutionalized."⁹

"Most fans have no intention of supporting a racist practice, but intentionally or not, they do perpetuate a romantic stereotype."¹⁰

You may not mean it. You may not see it. You may not care to look at it. But the Chief is a racist symbol. Native Americans are quite certain of this, and of the harm this symbol brings to them.

Isn't it time to retire the Chief? •

References

1. Random House dictionary (1-2), Wordnet, and Cambridge U. online dictionary.
2. Poupert and Becker, Communications and Relationships Between Reservation American Indians and Non-Indians, Focus Group Findings; www.airpi.org.
3. Shipler, A Country of Strangers, pp. 449, 491.
4. Dalton, Racial Healing, pp. 107, 109.
5. Pewewardy, Educators and Mascots: Challenging Contradictions, p. 260.
6. Op. Cit., Dalton, P. 129.
7. Op. Cit., Pewewardy, p. 265.
8. Gaskins, What are you? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People, p. 42.
9. Op. Cit., Gaskins, p. 137.
10. Spindel, Dancing at Halftime, p. 254.

The full text and references may be found online at RetireTheChief.org.

www.RetireTheChief.org: Welcome • Letters • Essays • Position statements • Web sites • Pro-/Anti- Chief dialogue

WELCOME

This site exists to give a voice to those who believe Chief Illiniwek should be retired, to promote discussion between those who are pro- and anti-Chief, and to encourage a change in policy - to retire the Chief. We want to help turn up the volume on the Chief debate. Regardless of your stand on this divisive issue, welcome. Much more may be found at our web site, www.RetireTheChief.org. We welcome your letters on the subject.