

Redskins and Hiawabop:

By George H. Fathauer

Racism at Miami

Guest Column

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Ed. Note—George H. Fathauer is a professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Miami University.

Last year I called President Shriver's attention to a growing tendency among American Indians to speak out against the widespread use of racist stereotypes by athletic teams, advertisers and the mass media. Specifically, the use of the term "Redskins" is objectionable since, for many Indians, it falls into the same category as the epithets that have been applied to Blacks, Jews, Italians, Poles and other "minorities" in the United States.

President Shriver indicated sympathetic concern for the problem and referred the matter of Miami's use of Indian stereotypes to the Athletic Board for consideration. I recently received a letter from him expressing the Board's feeling that the use of "Redskins" is not meant to be derogatory, that the Indian representations (for example, in the center of the basketball court) should be drawn in a dignified, positive manner, and that the Indian dancer could do authentic Indian dances in an authentic costume.

The President indicated that if any further steps were to be taken in the matter it would have to be at the initiative of the students.

This article is intended to present the issue to the student body, together with some of my own reactions. I agree with the President and the Athletic Board that Miami has never intended to derogate Indians. This is one of the most pervasive aspects of racism; the dominant group is not even aware that its stereotyping is objectionable to a minority.

This is particularly true with respect to Indians, who have rarely been vocal in their objections to the use of terms such as "squaw", "redskins", or being addressed as "chief" by whites.

The fact that all Indians may not object to "Redskins" does not make its use any more justifiable. There undoubtedly are some Blacks who do not object to racist labels, and may even make their living by pandering to the stereotypes of the majority.

However, in this day and age no University would consider having an "Amos and Andy" sketch between halves of a basketball game. The Indians are not being fanatical about this issue. One of the leaders pointed out on the "Today" television show recently that they did not object to the name "Indians" being attached to the Cleveland Baseball Club, but they did object to the stupid depiction of the Indian symbol, "Chief Wahoo."

On the other hand, he indicated approval of the Chicago Black Hawks' depiction of Chief Black Hawk as being authentic. The

fact that young, college-educated Indians are leading this movement to eliminate negative stereotypes is adequate reason for the majority to refrain from their use.

Another argument against giving up the name "Redskins" is that it is traditional. We have changed many other traditions: for example, when I was a Miami student the sexes sat separately at football games. The STUDENT history of athletics at Miami recently pointed out that the teams were called "The Big Red" for almost half of our sports history. "Redskins" was adopted around 1930, so it is not that traditional.

I agree that the portrayal of Indians can be made positive and dignified and I will look forward to improvements by the Athletic Board along this line, since an Indian designation is something to be proud of. I cannot see, however, how the Indian dancer stereotype can be made palatable under present circumstances.

Let me make it clear that my criticism is in no way connected with the student who performs as Hiawabop (another patronizing label). It is the idea of the dancer that would be considered objectionable.

At Stanford University, Associate Provost Raymond Bachetti, in reference to their Indian dancer, is quoted as saying that the caricature "systematically insults the Indian people." Stanford and Dartmouth are being prodded by their student governments to abandon Indian dancers and to change the Indian image. A few years ago, Marquette University students created "Willie Wampum." When Marquette's team drew ahead of their opponents, Willie would cross the court during time outs and "scalp" the opposition. When a group of Indian students protested last year, Marquette, urged on by the student government, put him out of existence.

When you put our Indian dancer in context with his peers—a grotesque, prancing, Bowling Green Falcon and Ohio's silly "male and female bobcats"—it is hard to see how a dignified portrayal of Indian culture is possible.

It may be possible to remove the "savage" stereotype from the Indian dancer, but I doubt that it can be done successfully, and I think we would be better off without the symbol.

Incidentally, the mention of other mascots illustrates another kind of argument that opponents of Indian dignity have raised.

called the "Orionis" or the national Rifle Association might object to the Baltimore

It is suggested that bird lovers might object to having Baltimore Bullets. This absurdity proves the point since Indians are human beings, with feelings about themselves that really matter.

Similarly, it has been argued that "Padres", "Saints" or "Angels" fall into the same category as "Redskins." If any saints, angels or Padres protest the use of these nicknames, their objections should certainly be taken seriously. Furthermore, if the new Navajo College wishes to call itself the "Redskins" it would be their own business, but does anybody believe they will?

In summary, I believe Miami should abandon the name "Redskins", eliminate the Indian dancer, and change other terms such as "Redskin Reservation." The ingenuity of our student body could certainly develop ways of continuing the Indian association in a positive way. What about "Calumet Club," suggesting the Indian desire for peace as well as war, as a substitute for Redskin Reservation?

We might name something after Tecumseh. Although not a Miami, he was a great leader of the Indians in our area who was regarded by William Henry Harrison as "one of those uncommon geniuses which spring up occasionally to produce revolutions and overturn the established order of things."

Miami students might want to sponsor a scholarship for an American Indian student. How about an exhibit of Contemporary Indian Art? Scores of other suggestions might be generated from those who care for the positive values of Indian culture.

Finally, I am in no way attempting to take a paternalistic attitude on behalf of Indians. They are capable of handling their own affairs, and I would not presume to speak for them. I am raising this issue as a faculty member and an alumnus in the hope that Miami University will take the initiative in disavowing an ingrained form of racism.

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