

Common Myths About The Issues Surrounding The Fighting Sioux Logo

And

Other Thoughts

By

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Other than writing a letter or two to the editor, reluctantly engaging in debates on the logo while taking classes at UND, or occasionally trying to “educate” Indians and non-Indians why the logo is morally wrong, I have never been at the forefront of the anti-logo movement. Why? Because, many years ago, I accepted the fact that we Indians did not have the political clout to change the logo; therefore, I became patient, content in the knowledge the logo will eventually change, if not during my lifetime then my children’s lifetime.

As a 54-year-old Dakota, born and raised on the Spirit Lake Nation, the reasons for my opposition to Indian logos and mascots started in my childhood. My late mother, Mercie Jerome, was a fluent Dakota language speaker who did not learn to speak English until she was nine years old. Born in 1922, when racism against Indians was rampant, she did what she had to, to survive in a “White man’s world.” However, she never relinquished her “Indianness” as some did to make it easier for them. She was happiest when she was visiting (laughing and joking) with her sisters or other tribal members in the Dakota language. In spite of the extreme poverty she lived in, she was proud of who she was.

“We’re Sioux,” she would proudly say. “Never be ashamed of who you are,” in reference to those Indians who, for whatever reason, tried to forget they were Indian and began to act, talk, and live like the “White man.” She instilled in me the pride of being Indian and, as a result, I was against the logo, even before I was aware there was a logo.

It is this pride in who I am that enabled me to obtain three degrees from UND in spite of the racism I encountered there. Contrary to what some may think, encountering racist behavior spawned by the logo made me even more determined to succeed. Furthermore, as a citizen of North Dakota, I have just as much right as anyone to attend

UND and I was darned if I was going to let a few racist yahoos stop me from reaching my goals.

Over the years, many myths arose surrounding the logo, some generated by Native American logo supporters, some generated by non-Indian logo supporters. As they have been discredited and discarded, new ones have arisen in their place. Here are a few:

- Myth #1: *Paying tribal members to advocate for the logo is effective.* Granted this strategy has had some short term effectiveness, but only short term due to several reasons. When selecting tribal members to advocate for the logo, outsiders (non-tribal members) do not really know the individuals they choose very well. As a result, they often select individuals who do not have credibility with other tribal members on this issue to effectively change their minds. Some of these paid tribal members did not grow up on the reservation, or left the reservation at an early age and lost touch, and others go through the motions of advocating for the logo just to get the money. There are several other reasons, but that is another article. The main reason these individuals become ineffective is due to how they are “trained” to advocate for the logo. Because non-Indian logo supporters see us as nothing more than a defeated, broken down race of people who constantly complain about being victimized, they train Native American logo supporters to talk and act like victims. Not that some of them need any training. Indians with a victim mentality often underestimate the “quiet” resolve of those of us who refuse to be regulated to a victim role. Here are some phrases I have heard parroted from several tribal members that reflect the victim mentality training they have received:

- ✓ In regards to racism, they say “It will always be there” and “There will be repercussion against the tribal member if the logo is retired ” are two examples of an Indian with a victim mentality. I recall a conversation I had with a logo supporter who had used these two excuses. “Why does it [racism have to always be there] . . .?,” I asked him in response to his “It will always be there” reason. “Why can’t we fight to end racism [instead]?,” I asked him. “So what [if the logo is retired and there are repercussions]?,” I asked in reply to his repercussion excuse. “We’re Dakota, for \_\_\_\_\_ sake!,” I told him. “We have been fighting

racism for years! Why would we be scared of doing so now?" *I found it highly amusing and ironic that here was an individual who supported the "Fighting Sioux" yet did not have the fight in him to end racism and was frightened by potential repercussions if the logo was retired.*

- ✓ It is hypocritical for Native Americans to call their sports teams "Indians," "Warriors," "Braves," etc. This is the most juvenile of all excuses. What else are we going to call ourselves? Honkies? Apples? (Term applied to Indians who act and think like a non-Indian.) Any adult will realize we Native Americans have the right to call our teams "*Indians*," "*Warriors*," "*Braves*" or any other name associated with our tribe or Native Americans in general; after all, we are Native Americans, for Pete's sake. Just like the Scandinavians have the right to call their sports team Vikings and the Irish have the right to call their sports team Fighting Irish.
- ✓ Another excuse they point to is the logo used by the State Highway Department and the Indian Head nickel. To compare these logos to the Fighting Sioux logo is comparing apples to oranges. First of all, the Highway Patrol logo is not tribal specific and it represents law and order and real-life courage and dedication, which are traditional Indian values. Secondly, you don't see the Highway Patrol logo on toilet seats, in obscene pictures, etc. Finally, you don't see any Highway Patrol officer parading around in war bonnets, or painting their faces, nor the Highway Patrol logo resulting in degrading images of Native Americans – I won't even waste my time talking about the Indian Head nickel.
- *Myth #2: Individuals with Indian ancestors who never lived on an Indian reservation and who are not a legal member of any tribe are successful spokespersons for keeping the logo.* This could not be farther from the truth. These "Indians" who are paraded in front of the camera to support the logo while giving non-Indians the false impression that they represent all Indians is totally false. They have as much influence with reservation Indians as they would on whom our next chairperson is going to be – absolutely none.
- *Myth #3: A general vote by tribal members in favor of the logo will automatically let UND keep the logo.* As many non-Indians observed, tribal council members come

and go. When council members who are in favor of the logo leave office, council members who are against the logo might very well replace them. Here on Spirit Lake, I cannot remember the last time we elected the same person to the tribal council chairperson position for two consecutive terms. The same holds true for my district (Fort Totten), while the St. Michael district usually replaces their representative every eight years. Two other districts on the Spirit Lake Nation, Woodlake and Crow Hill, have voted the same person in as their council representative for many years, until last year when the incumbent from the Woodlake district was beaten, in what many view as a stunning upset. In addition, there have been four recall petitions against Spirit Lake tribal council members in the past three years – two were successful and two failed. With the high probability that at least two council members at Spirit Lake are going to be replaced at each election cycle, any resolution in support of the logo will be tenuous at best. The State Board of Higher Education would be foolhardy to keep the logo under these uncertain conditions. To illustrate just how fluid the logo issue is here on Spirit Lake, here is an excerpt from an article in the *Grand Forks Herald*:

*Spirit Lake Nation condemns UND's Fighting Sioux nickname and logo (8/30/05). The Spirit Lake Nation, during an open council meeting this evening, unanimously rejected UND's claim that the Fighting Sioux nickname and logo was honoring them. Persons attending reported that when it was asked that those who were against the use of the name and logo stand, almost 200 people rose up and began to applaud!*

The question may be asked: Why didn't our council call for a vote then?

- Myth #4: *Resolutions passed by a tribal government are not relevant.* (Goetz's statement that the NDSBHE should not rely on [Tribal Council] resolutions in making its decisions.) Now our resolutions may not mean much off our reservation, but they are legally binding on Spirit Lake and other reservations as well. What will happen if our tribal council passes a resolution supporting the nickname? Will Goetz stand by his assertion tribal resolutions are not relevant?
- Myth #5: *The Sioux Nation will become unknown and forgotten should UND discontinue the use of the logo.* The Lakota/Dakota/Nakota (Sioux) Nation is one of

the most famous of all Native American tribes. We are the ones who defeated Custer, survived Wounded Knee, and had leaders such as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Little Crow, and many other leaders too numerous to mention here who are famous world wide. There have been dozens, if not hundreds, of movies made and literally thousands of books written about us. We have one of the fastest growing populations in North Dakota. The logo is actually holding us back from making progress because those hard core logo supporters are racist towards us and hold us back in other areas as well.

- *Myth #6: North Dakota State Board of Higher Education will abide by the agreement they authorized.* From what I read about the NDSBHE regarding this issue, they are bought and paid for by the Ralph Englestad family. The Ralphies will never let the NDSBHE abide by its agreement to retire the logo should it fail to get the two resolutions needed to keep the logo.
- *Myth #7: The logo does not promote racism.* This myth is the most perplexing to me. It is mind boggling how Indians (and non-Indians) who support the logo are blind to the racism spawned by the logo. I received three degrees from UND, and I know I did not imagine the racism I encountered while attending classes there, and still encounter, because of the logo. I had very good friendships with several non-Indians broken up because of the logo. Instead, I often hear Native Americans who support the logo make excuses for racist behavior. Excuses like “I smile and walk away...” Because I am extremely proud of who I am, I do not accept racism with a smile and walk away. Neither am I intimidated by it. Instead, I confront it. Like my mother, I passed my pride of who I am on to my children. I tell them, “You are not victims; you are to never act like victims when you encounter racism. Don’t smile and walk away; stand up for who you are.”
- *Myth #8: There are more important issues than the logo.* What can be more important than an oppressed people standing up for and demanding a stop to racism and hurtful practices by their oppressors? If we fail to stand to racism on this issue, will we fail to stand up to it in other areas where racism is also evident? Areas such as tribal sovereignty, land issues, state and federal funding, just to name a few.

- Myth #9: *The logo supporters will share profits from the sale of Fighting Sioux merchandise with us.* This is the biggest myth of all and mostly believed by Native American logo supporters who say something to the effect “We hope something good comes out of it” or “As long as something good comes out of it” when expressing their support of the logo. In my view, this is thinly veiled begging. Time and time again, I hear Native American logo supporters say non-Indian logo supporters will agree to share revenue generated by the sale of Fighting Sioux merchandise with us. First, that will never happen. Already, non-Indian logo supporters are expressing the view that giving us money to keep the logo would not be considered classy, which is their nice way of saying, “We’ll never get one dime from them.” Secondly, we don’t need any money from the sale of Fighting Sioux merchandise. We can fund our students with our own money if they are successful in college. My tribe was extremely generous when helping me out with educational funds when I was in college. In addition, I made loans, applied for tuition waivers, and took classes while working full-time. Thirdly, and most importantly, why do we even want their money? Recently, a non-Indian friend was telling me he saw a Native American on TV talking about negotiating for the use of our name. He was quite contemptuous towards this individual and said to me, “If you are proud of whom you are, why are you willing to negotiate away your name?” – I agreed with him. This reminds me of a quotation from a woman, a non-Indian named Carly Fiorina, the former president of Hewlett-Packard. In explaining why she had taken some entrenched stands during her career and been unwilling to negotiate on moral issues, she replied, “Because once you sell your soul, no one can ever buy it back for you.” I am not willing to sell myself to the Ralph Englestad family for any percentage of Sioux merchandise funds. I have always tried to understand why they (other Indians) would support such a logo. From what I read and heard, they either think racism does not exist in North Dakota, or they are frightened as to what will happen if the logo is retired. Then I read Paulo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and I began to get a glimmer of understanding why other Indians and non-Indians would support a logo. Freire’s book is about colonialism and how the colonialist is the oppressor and the indigenous people are the oppressed. The first chapter in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is amazingly similar to the

logo issue. When I hear Native American logo supporters advocating for us to live and act like victims, when I see them try to emulate non-Indian logo supporters by wearing “Fighting Sioux” clothing, the following quotes, taken from chapter one of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, come to mind:

- “The behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor.”
- “They have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class.”
- “The oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors.”

*Not so long ago, while playing pool with a new acquaintance, a Chippewa Indian, whose mother is from White Earth, but who had lived the majority of his life in Grand Forks, asked me, “Erich, what is it with you guys? I went to school at Central when it had the Redskins logo. I had a lot of pride when I played sports.”*

*I explained to him how my mother had instilled her pride of being Sioux in me and when I finished I asked him this question: “If I called members of your tribe nothing but welfare dependent, FAS babies, free cheese, ignorant, prairie niggas, etc., etc., people” and then said, “Oh, by the way, we want to use the Chippewa logo to honor you and need your support, what would you say?” As he stood thinking about it I said, “Where’s your pride, man? Finally, he said, “I see your point.” After thinking about it some more, he said, “See . . . I never had someone like your mother when I was growing up.” A couple of weeks later he told me I owed him \$20. Puzzled, I looked at him and he said, “I paid \$20 for a UND shirt that I’m never going to wear.” We both had a good laugh.*

My new friend is an example of the decent, good-hearted logo supporters who honestly and sincerely think that they are honoring us. Now that every excuse to keep the logo has been discredited in his mind and in the minds of other rational, decent people, they have arrived at the conclusion that all rational, decent people come to: The logo is highly offensive to thousands of Native Americans and should be retired. Furthermore, I have never met anyone who was opposed to the logo change his or her mind and start to support the logo. On the other hand, I have convinced many logo supporters, Indian and non-Indian, to change their minds, and if the comments sections and letters to the editor are any indication, many others are dropping their support for the logo as well. (Our)

young children, once they get old enough to make their own decisions and are educated on the subject, will also oppose the logo. Our numbers will continue to grow while the logo supporters will continue to diminish. What will be left is a minority whose support of the logo is code/cover for racist thinking and actions against Native Americans.

Getting back to why Paulo Freire's book gave me some insight to non-Indian logo supporters as well, when I read a UND hockey coach's passionate speech on how ecstatic he was when "playing Sioux hockey" and how he was a member of the "silent majority" who wanted to keep the logo, this quote from Freire's book came to mind: *"The oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle."* And I thought how many racist incidents do Native Americans such as I and (yes) those Indians who support the logo have to endure so he can continue to feel good "playing Sioux hockey?" Apparently, his pride in being a "Sioux" did not stop him committing the shameful act of showing his middle finger to a referee one night.

Which brings me to my next point: My opposition against a racist logo is not to be mistaken for opposition against hockey players or any other athletes, nor against UND or its students and staff, or against the good people of North Dakota. My opposition is against those very few who stubbornly hang on to what is a racist logo against all logic and rational thinking.

To all non-Indian logo supporters out there, I make this request. If you truly want to honor me as a Native American, treat me and my family the way you would want to be treated. Don't make me stand in line while you're pretending to do something else. Wait on me promptly in your cafes, and when I am in your stores, don't follow me around like I am going to steal everything that isn't nailed down. When you start treating me as a fellow human being, you will see no need to "honor" me with a logo.

One of the reasons I was loathe to write a letter speaking up against the logo is because it gives the non-Indian logo supporters what they wanted. It would pit me against my friends and relatives who are in favor of the logo – and now against members of my (Spirit Lake) tribal council. Now that our tribal council has publicized their willingness to pass a resolution in favor of it, you will see tribal members arguing with other tribal members (i.e., sibling against sibling, relative against relative, and friends against friends). The issue was divisive before, but it is not nearly as divisive as it is now



that our tribal council is contemplating passing a resolution in favor of it. All the while, non-Indian logo supporters are standing by gleefully rubbing their hands while watching us fight amongst ourselves.

There are those who point out Sioux is not our real name; therefore, why are you so upset? Following this logic, then, are we not supposed to get upset when I hear “Sioux Sucks” or see a picture with a “Sioux” doing something unnatural with a buffalo . . .? Instead, are we supposed to say that is not us and forget about it? Come on now; give us more credit than that. Let me ask this: “Is there any knowledgeable person out there who thinks the UND Fighting Sioux logo is not representing the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota Nation?” The answer is obvious; of course it does.

One final point before I close. Will a resolution in favor of the logo by either tribe, or the determination by logo supporters to keep the name, put an end to the dissatisfaction of the hundreds of thousands of Native Americans who are against the logo? Will the hundreds of organizations that have resolutions calling for the logo to be retired all of sudden withdraw their opposition and be quiet? Will the great Sioux Nation, which is composed of all Dakota/Lakota/Nakota bands withdraw their opposition to the logo? The answer to all these questions is an obvious NO! Finding an excuse to keep the logo by any of the involved parties will be a short-term, shortsighted disastrous solution to a long-term problem, which will end up creating even more problems.

In closing, we have been fighting extermination, oppression, and racism for over 400 years. While there are some Native Americans who are comfortable in their role as the oppressed, there are just as many, if not more of us, who will never give up the fight for equality. I am no longer a young man, but the years I do have left I will use to oppose the logo. My children are also opposed to the logo and they have many, many years ahead of them and, if need be, they will carry on the fight long after I am gone to the Spirit World. **THE LOGO WILL GO, IF NOT IN MY LIFETIME, THEN IN THEIRS.** The sooner the logo is retired, the sooner I could travel throughout the state of North Dakota and visit with my fellow tribesmen and my many non-Indian friends without having to worry about the fear, suspicion, and anger created by the logo.