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12 April 2016

White America and its “Indian” Mascots: The Most Salient Form of Interaction

Key Words: Disconnect, Portrayal, Mascots, Stereotypes, Derogatory Language, History

Description: Native American interactions with the rest of American society has always been complicated due to a long history of misconduct, violence, and attempts to repair the damages. Societal acceptance of “Indian” or Native American referenced mascots is one of those instances of misconduct and Native Americans are actively fighting for respectful representation.

Key points:

- ❖ There is a disconnect and lack of awareness between the Native Americans and White American
- ❖ Stereotypical imagery of Native Americans is the only mainstream representation of Native Americans for White Americans.
- ❖ Usage of Native American references as mascots for high school and professional sports teams is detrimental to Native Americans and a perpetuation of racism.
- ❖ Resistance, by corporations and others, shows the longstanding effect this imagery has had, a normalization of derogatory imagery.

Issue Brief:

Native Americans are the ethno-racial minority with the longest standing history in America and with European Americans. However, as less than one percent of the American population, a history of forced assimilation, and 22% of that population living on reservations, they are arguably the ethno-racial minority that White Americans interact with the least. Limited day to day interactions between white and native Americans causes the vast majority of the white American population to develop ideologies about Native Americans from history text books, old western movies, and other symbolic representations (Hiatt). The most

prominent form of symbolic representation is the usage of Native Americans as mascots for sports teams from the high school to professional level. The representation of a culture as mascots perpetuates negative stereotypes about Native Americans and can be interpreted as racist propaganda endorsed by the United States. In the last few decades, Native Americans have begun to demand the removal of the derogatory and offensive portrayal of Native Americans as mascots, and other symbolic representation such as logos or brands. There is an abundance of support from white Americans, however there is also resistance to change.

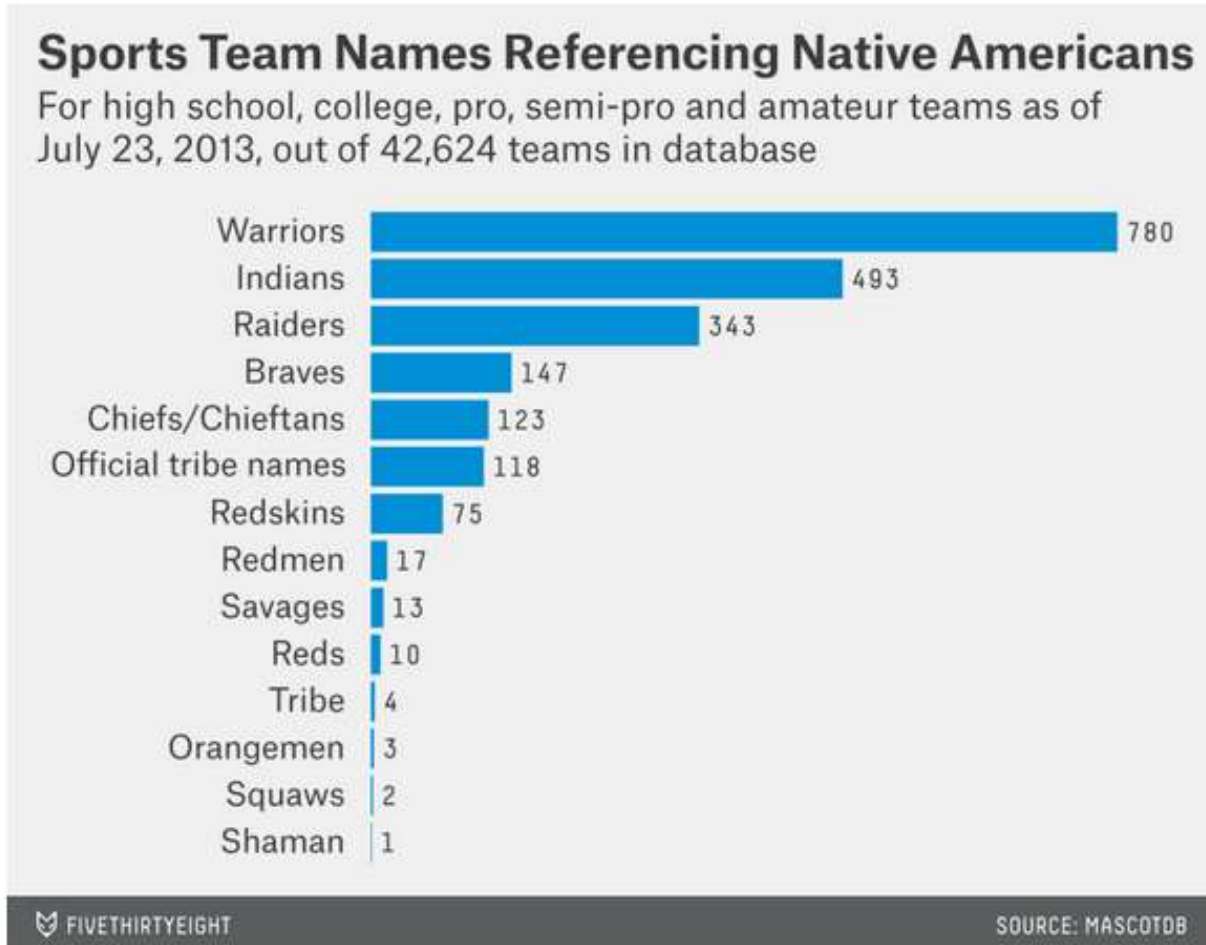
In history books, White Americans learn about the purchasing of Manhattan Island and Columbus' arrival, the conducting of treaties, and the savagery of Native Americans. Rarely, were the heinous acts committed against Native Americans told nor an accurate depiction given of the current state of the Natives. This omission of a part of the history of the United States has created a legacy of the conquered savages and the powerful conqueror; which resulted in the conquered living peacefully on their reservations at the benevolent will of the American government. This fragmented history has led to extraneous stereotypes about Natives as savages, in addition to the lack of cultural representation. Thus, the usage of insensitive language about Native Americans in sports arenas perpetuates stereotypes with the usage of Native American words, ideas, or associations as mascots has no contextual significance to White Americans and causes the continuation of racism and prejudice. An example of White Americans' inability to understand the harmful nature of imagery and symbolism due to cultural disconnect is the town seal of Whitesboro, New York. The seal is a depiction of a white man strangling a Native American and when it was brought to the attention of the town that the imagery was problematic, a town vote resulted in the desire to keep the seal ("Whitesboro").



Two Bulls, Marty. "Whitesboro, NY." *Indian Country Today Media Network.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.

Well into the 21st century, there is still widespread acceptance of derogatory imagery of Native Americans in school and in professional athletics, two areas the White American population interact with daily. The "Change the Mascot" movement has become a national campaign to educate people about the issue of harmful language and its affect on Native American children and how they interact with the rest of population. Removal of derogatory imagery from mainstream usage, especially the term "redskins"—Native Americans have similar views about the word "redskins", now referring to it as the R-word, as African Americans about the N-word—is the main goal of the campaign/movement, which has increased momentum with the influx of social media attention and news coverage on the issue. Large strides to eradicate this issue are taking place as school boards and sports teams across the country are making the decision to change the names of their mascots, the state of California even created

a bill banning racially offensive branding, however there is still resistance.



Moya-Smith, Simon. "Report Says More Than 2,000 Native American Mascots Are Not Contested." *Indian Country Today Media Network.com*. Indian Country Today Media Network, LLC, 21 Sept. 2014. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.

Professional athletics is a large part of American society and culture. As major corporations, and the NFL as an organization specific to the US, they exemplify American culture. Washington DC's NFL team has received majority of the attention as the team refuses to change its mascot name from the R-word, which has been ruled a racial slur and thus "not entitled to taxpayer-financed copyright protections" by the U.S. Patent Office (the NFL receives subsidies from US taxpayers). The refusal to change the name is to make a conscious decision to encourage bigotry and racism (Tarver). This mascot removal movement is representative of the current-day relationship between Native American citizens and White American citizens, with

some progress toward mutual understanding and cultural tolerance coupled with generations of engrained ideology to overcome. As the subtle messages of acceptance of racist propaganda continue to be embedded in America society and contributes to racial prejudices, the progress of the nation will be affected.

Websites for Further Exploration:

<http://www.native-languages.org/states.htm>

<http://www.ncai.org>

<http://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/native-american-cultures>

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com>

<http://www.changethemascot.org>

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Hiatt, Fred. "Moving beyond the 'imaginary Indians' Perception." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 21 Sept. 2014. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.

Tarver, Erin C.. "On the Particular Racism of Native American Mascots". *Critical Philosophy of Race* 4.1 (2016): 95–126. Web..

"Whitesboro, N.Y. Decides Racist Seal Is A Bad Idea After All." *Huffington Post*. Ed. Chris D'Angelo. TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., 22 Jan. 2016. Web. 12 Apr. 2016.