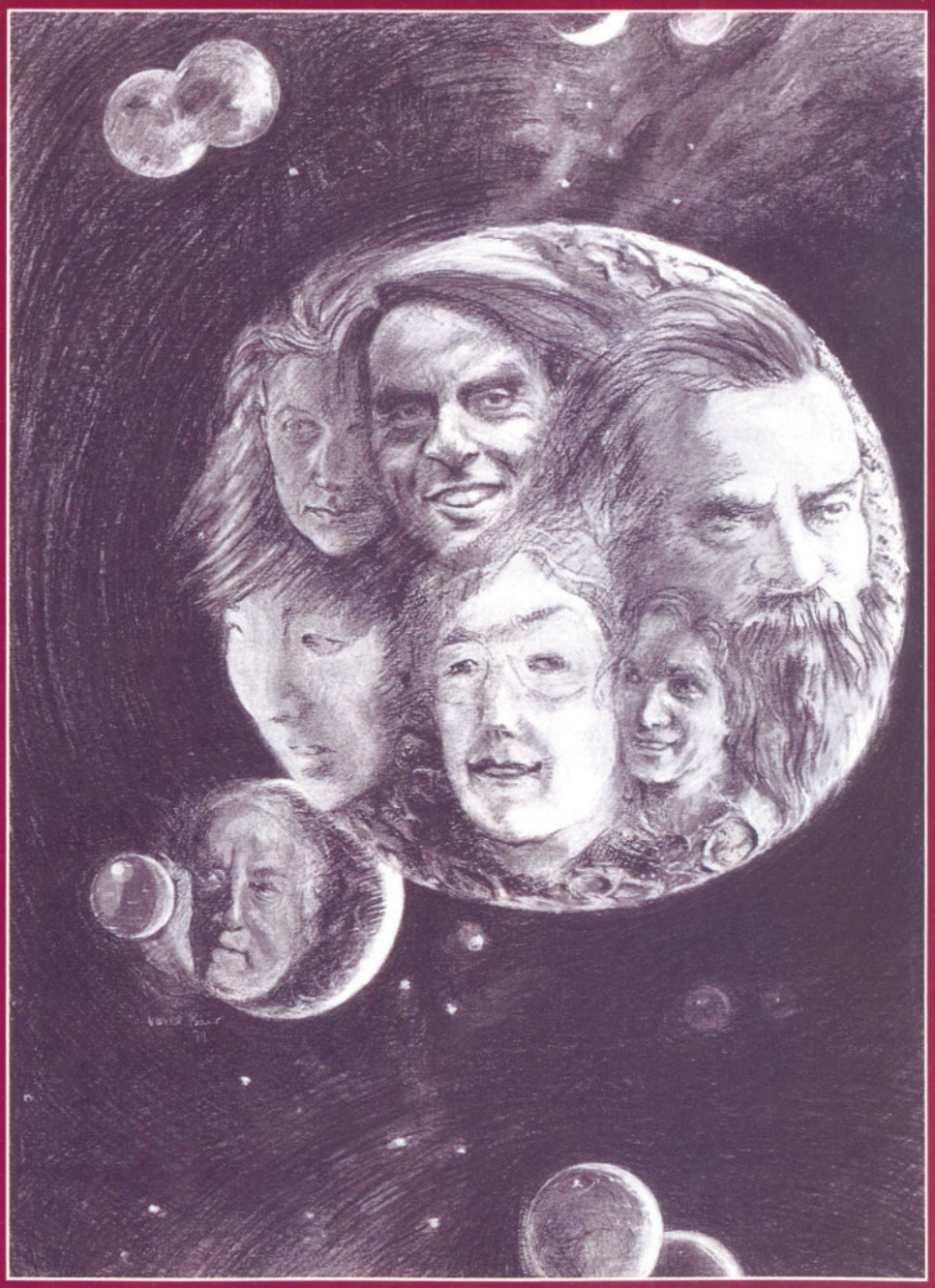
VOLUME 9

COSMOS 1999

JOURNAL OF THE COSMOS CLUB OF WASHINGTON, DC



Assessing Racial Sensitivities

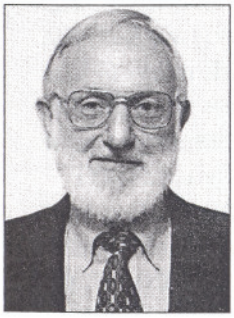
Dolph L. Hatfield

❧

When ethnic groups object to the use of certain words or stereotypes and those who perpetrate these acts counter the objections by saying that their intentions are not racially motivated, who is right?

David Howard, an aide to Washington, DC, Mayor Anthony A. Williams, used the word "niggardly" in a January 15, 1999, discussion with two city employees. Howard was describing how his office must manage a tight budget to meet the needs of the city's residents. Even though the word "niggardly" means "miserly," several DC employees objected to the use of a word they felt had racial overtones. As a result, Howard offered his resignation, and the mayor accepted it. Although Howard subsequently returned to the DC government at the mayor's request, the quick acceptance of his resignation sparked a national debate over racial sensitivities and political correctness.

Is what happened to David Howard simply an example of today's racial sensitivities being taken to the extreme? Many in the news media believed this to be the case. A few weeks after the incident, John Stossel, an ABC news correspondent, did a segment on politically correct language for the program, "20/20," and concluded his story by saying "I think it's a good thing when a public official is niggardly with our money. 'Give Me A Break.'" During his presentation, Stossel also questioned whether the name of Squaw Valley should be changed "because some Native Americans object to the word 'squaw,'" whether he would offend "Hispanics if [he used] 'Spic and Span,'" and whether he would be "in trouble with Japanese and Chinese people if [he said] that it's a 'chink' in our armor that we should nip in the bud?"



Dolph L. Hatfield (CC '97) is a molecular biologist in the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, MD. His research focuses on the role of selenium in preventing cancer and heart disease. Active in civil rights issues in the Washington, DC, area since the late 1960s, Dolph is a lay reader at St. John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square. He enjoys spelunking, mountain climbing, and off-road racing.

In fact, many Native Americans have objected to the use of the word "squaw" on the basis that it is an extremely demeaning term. Latin Americans have written to Procter & Gamble asking that the name "Spic and Span" be changed, as it carries racist overtones. And many Asian Americans feel that the word "chink" is terribly racist, regardless of the context of its use.

Clearly, there is sharp disagreement regarding the political correctness of a number of words, terms, and expressions. Our language is an evolving entity, and there are countless examples of words that were once used, but now have come into disfavor for being offensive. The Census Bureau, in its preparations for the 2000 Census, would no sooner classify children born to unwed mothers as "illegitimate," or offer respondents the opportunity to classify themselves as "Negro," even though both terms were used in the 1970 Census.

But it is not just words that come under public scrutiny. Minorities in America often complain that they are being portrayed or symbolized in public in a prejudicial manner (that is, they are being stereo-

It is unlikely that the use of analogous acts in sports and advertising involving religious symbols of non-Native Americans would be tolerated.

typed). Those accused of doing the stereotyping may counter that their intent is not racially motivated. When opposing viewpoints exist as to what is racially offensive, a set of guidelines may facilitate an assessment as to whether the choice of words that affect minorities and the public portrayal of these groups are politically or "ethnically" correct.

OBJECTIONS OF THE AFFECTED PARTY

At the outset, it is important to note that only the affected party can describe how it feels to hear a certain word or expression or to see his/her race portrayed in public. Accordingly, one important guideline for assessing what should be acceptable may well be how the *affected party* views a particular term or act. Critics of this approach may be quick to point out that it may be difficult to identify a united, uniform affected party in every case—would all African Americans take offense at the expression "Little Black Sambo?" Most likely, yes. Would all African Americans be offended by hearing the word "niggardly?" Perhaps not; indeed, a number of David Howard's black colleagues and several black columnists refuted the charges of racism in this particular case. However, it is one thing for members within the affected party to disagree on what is racially sensitive and an entirely different matter for individuals outside the affected party, like John Stossel, to dictate what is racially sensitive.

Historically, the feelings of the affected party have had considerable impact on the manner in which society responds to racially sensitive issues. For example, words like "wetback" and "gook," expressions like "a tough monkey" and "Yellow Peril," caricatures like "Little Black Sambo" and "The Frito Bandito," and cartoons of Asiatic Hordes and black-faced minstrel shows are no longer acceptable because, in each case, the affected group said that such acts constituted stereotyping and society agreed.

Claims of racial stereotyping have not always been favorably received. For example, Asian Americans expressed displeasure with what they felt was biased media coverage in reporting the 1996-97 Democratic campaign finance scandal involving Asians. More specifically, Asian Americans objected to expressions like "Bamboo Network" (used by *The American Spectator*) and "The Asian Connection" (used by William Safire). They also protested the depiction of President Bill Clinton, First Lady Hillary Clinton, and Vice-President Al Gore as Asian figures on the March 24, 1997, cover of the *National Review*. They argued that these figures, with slanted eyes and buck teeth, and the President wearing a coolie hat, the Vice President draped in Buddhist robes, and the First Lady dressed in a Communist official's uniform, represented racial stereotyping. They suggested that the editor of the magazine, John O'Sullivan, was a racist. O'Sullivan demanded an apology and contended that the magazine's cover was "hostile to President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and Hillary Clinton—and nobody else." The question of racial prejudice with respect to these issues remains unresolved.

SPORTS AND STEREOTYPES

Native Americans, who have long maintained that they are stereotyped in sports and advertising, are another example of a minority whose feelings have not been fully appreciated. They have objected to the names of such sports teams as "Redskins," "Blackhawks," "Indians," "Braves," "Chiefs," "Seminoles," and "Warriors," and to Native

American images being used as mascots for these teams. They have objected to names and images used in advertising, such as Crazy Horse malt liquor, Land-o-Lakes butter, and Red Man chewing tobacco, and to the use of words like "squaw."

Those who support the use of Native American names, images, and logos in sports and advertising defend their actions with any of a number of statements. Many of the more frequently used are worthy of consideration as they give insight into the perspectives and perceptions of those who make them. For example, some supporters contend "Native Americans should not take offense when none is intended." Others express the opinion that "Native Americans are just too sensitive," while others comment "We are only honoring Native Americans." In each instance, it is apparent that the intention is not to be offensive. Other statements, such as "I know many Native Americans, including tribal chiefs, who do not object to the use of these terms," point out that Native Americans, and even Native American leaders, are not unanimous in their claims that such acts constitute stereotyping. Statements like "Native Americans do not appreciate or understand the tradition that has been established in using 'Redskins,' (the name of the Washington professional football team) or 'Chief Illiniwek' (the mascot of the University of Illinois "Fighting Illini")," suggest a lack of understanding as to why Native Americans have taken so long to object and raise the question as to whether Native Americans should now be taken seriously.

Who is right? Are Native Americans justified in their claims of racial stereotyping? Or, are Native Americans overreacting and belatedly so?

DOING UNTO OTHERS

When society does not honor the feelings of a minority that maintains it is the victim of racial prejudice, then another guideline is needed to establish whether the affected party is justified in its claims. Such a guideline might be provided by the answer to the question "How would other minorities respond to a similar act or situation?" This guideline assesses racial prejudice by analogy.

Indeed, affected parties often point to unacceptable analogous situations when endeavoring to support their claims of racial stereotyping. Asian Americans took this approach when they compared the phrases "Bamboo Network" and "The Asian Connection," used in the news media, to the unacceptable expressions "Asiatic Hordes" and "Yellow Peril." Asian Americans also used this approach in voicing their displeasure over the Asian caricatures on the cover of the *National Review*. For example, Dr. Frank Wu, law professor at Howard University in Washington, DC, wrote several articles questioning whether the editorship of the *National Review* magazine would have used President Clinton in blackface, with exaggerated facial expressions and eating a watermelon, if African Americans had been implicated in a similar sandal involving campaign funds. Congresswoman Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) said that the magazine would not have published images of Italian Americans with the label "Mafia connection" or German Americans with swastikas. Application of the second proposed guideline, then, would suggest that the cover of the *National Review* was prejudicial to Asian Americans.

Native Americans often support their claims of stereotyping by pointing out that other minorities would not accept analogous forms of portrayal. Tim Giago, former president, publisher and editor of *Indian Country Today*, the largest, independent Native American newspaper in this country, has written "Pretend that Mr. Jack Kent Cooke's son" [then the owner of the Washington redskins] "has decided that it is high time to honor African Americans instead of American Indians and he does this by changing the team mascot to the Washington Blackskins." Giago continues this article with numerous references to replacing the Native American mascot and the antics of the fans with painted faces and dressed in Native American attire with an African American mascot and the antics of the fans with faces painted black and "dressed in African attire [from the continent of Africa]."

Dr. Cornel Pewewardy of the Department of Education at Kansas University has written, "Would any industry consider promoting 'Blackman Chewing Tobacco,' 'Pope John Paul Malt Liquor,' or a sports team called the 'San Diego Jews'?" Suzan Shown Harjo, director of the Morning Star Institute, has described "Chief Wahoo" (mascot of the Cleveland Indians) as nothing more than a "Little Red Sambo," a comparison to the no longer acceptable "Little Black Sambo." Dennis Banks, national field director for the American Indian Movement, has equated the "Tomahawk Chop" (a gesture

It is not the intention of the fans who support sporting franchises that use names, logos, and mascots symbolizing Native Americans to offend this minority.

accompanied with a chant used by the fans of the Atlanta Braves) to a "Crucifix Chop."

The implications of Dennis Banks' analogy of the "Tomahawk Chop" to the "Crucifix Chop" are perhaps more subtle than first realized. Many of the images, logos, and other fanfare used by sports fans and employed in advertising involve Native American regalia, such as headdresses with eagle feathers, and Native American customs, such as painted faces and chanting. The eagle's feather is sacred to Native Americans as the eagle flies high in the sky, near the Great Spirit. Painted faces were used by many Native American tribes to prepare male youth for manhood and/or to prepare men for war, and these ceremonies were accompanied with chanting, or prayer. In other words, many of the images, logos, chants, and "costumes" used by sports fans and used in advertising are in fact religious symbols to Native Americans. It is unlikely that the use of analogous acts in sports and advertising involving religious symbols of non-Native Americans would be tolerated.

Two Native American names that have appeared recently and frequently in the television media are Apache and Cherokee. The "Apache" helicopter, which was widely used in the recent war in Kosovo, was mentioned almost daily in the news and Jeep "Cherokee" has been widely advertised by the Chrysler Corporation. Numerous articles and Letters to the Editor have appeared in Native American newspapers objecting to these names being used in this manner. The authors point out that society would not permit uses of names referring to African Americans, Mexican Americans, Jews, and other minorities in a similar context.

It is not the intention of the fans who support sporting franchises that use names, logos, and mascots symbolizing Native Americans to offend this minority. Likewise, it is not the intention of those individuals who use Native American names and images in advertising to stereotype this minority, nor is it the intention of the consumers who buy the advertised products to foster racial prejudice. However, these fans, advertisers, and consumers may not have considered that other minorities would most certainly take offense to similar acts, even though none was intended. Furthermore, these individuals may not have considered the fact that, if other minorities objected to similar acts, they would not be viewed as "just too sensitive." Those who feel that "we are only honoring Native Americans" might not have considered how other minorities would react if they were "honored" in a similar manner.

Statements such as "I know many Native Americans, including tribal chiefs, who do not object to the use of Indian names and images in sports and advertising" and "Native Americans do not appreciate the tradition that surrounds the use of [names like] 'redskins' and [mascots like] 'Chief Illiniwek'" appear to articulate good reasons for continuing the use of these names and mascots. It should be recalled, however, that during the early stages of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, many White Southerners argued similarly that most African Americans did not object to the "Southern way of life" and that it had been going on without incident for many years. There is no doubt that, during the early stages of the civil rights movement, many African Americans did not realize that the life-style imposed on them was wrong. Likewise, there is no doubt that many Native Americans do not realize that other minorities would find analogous names, images, and mascots prejudicial and the fact that these acts are not acceptable to other minorities

establishes that they constitute stereotyping. Even though those who participate in these acts justify continuing them on the basis that they have been used for a long period of time does not make them right.

RAISING THE BAR

There are of course other standards that can be used to assess racial prejudice. For example, the original use and meaning of a word, as well as its present-day connotation, are important. Native Americans maintain that "redskins" and "squaw" are among the most racist words used in today's society. The term "redskin" was introduced in the English language in 1699 and its initial uses were pejorative and opprobrious. The word "squaw" means "vagina" in two Native American dialects and refers to female genitalia in a third. Both words are defined in current dictionaries as offensive. Most certainly, the original uses of "redskin," the original meaning of "squaw," and the current definition of each word support the claims of Native Americans that these terms are extremely racist.

In response to a complaint filed against the Washington professional football team by a group of Native Americans headed by Suzan Shown Harjo, the US Patent and Trademark Office ruled on April 2, 1999, that the team no longer had the right to the trademark "Redskins" as it is disparaging to this minority. This decision shows that individuals outside the affected party are beginning to understand the feelings of Native Americans regarding the offensiveness of the word "redskins." Interestingly, the attorney for the Washington team, John Paul Reiner, and the team's director for public relations, Mike McCall, argued that the name was never intended to belittle or insult Native Americans, but, for the past 67 years, only to honor them.

In addition to the ruling by the US Patent and Trademark Office, there are other indications of an increased awareness in society that "redskins" is a derogatory word. As recently as July 1999, Binney & Smith Inc., the maker of Crayola crayons, announced the winner of a contest to rename Crayola's "Indian Red"—a brownish red crayon, named after the color of a type of clay found in India. Though the original name had nothing to do with American Indians, the company had received complaints for years about the offensive-sounding name. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the new name, "Chestnut," "meets the company's 'appropriateness' standards and isn't likely to offend anyone."

Furthermore, a number of prestigious newspapers in this country (e.g., *The Portland Oregonian*, *Salt Lake Times*, *Seattle Times*, and *The Star Tribune* [of Minneapolis]) have adopted a policy of not printing offensive terms such as "redskins." Miami University of Ohio dropped the nickname "redskins" as being too offensive to Native Americans and other major universities have changed their nicknames from Native American to non-Native American names (e.g., Stanford Indians to Cardinals, St. Johns Redmen to Redstorm, and Marquette Warriors to Golden Eagles). In light of the increasing awareness of the feelings of Native Americans and of the offensiveness of the word "redskins," it would seem likely that society will soon seek to ban this word from public use.

WHAT THE GUIDELINES TELL US

Application of these guidelines to acts that affect Asian Americans and Native Americans provides compelling evidence that these minorities are indeed victims of racial prejudice. But what about the use of other words or expressions that some members of the news media judge to be politically correct? Is "niggardly" an appropriate term? Certainly, the word "niggardly," as defined in the dictionary, has no racial connotation. Is it fair to resort to the dictionary on the one hand to support the claims of Native Americans that "redskin" and "squaw" are offensive, but, on the other hand, maintain that "niggardly" is politically incorrect even though the dictionary defines this word as miserly? While dictionaries can be relied on to establish the meaning of words, they cannot be used as the sole means of assessing racial sensitivities as they do not take into account the feelings of the affected party.

There is no question that considerable care must be taken in urging for restrictions on the use of any words. A large body of literature on social and political efforts to restrict "offensive" speech already exists and many universities, businesses, government agencies, and the like have adopted speech codes to make sure everyone remains "ethnically" correct. Clearly, these acts raise questions about freedom of speech.

Perhaps an awareness of the possible connotations that certain words may have to an affected

party and a sensitivity to the feelings expressed by the affected party can help society decide how certain words should be used without unduly restricting free speech. It is difficult to see how words can be judged to be politically or "ethnically" correct, if they are not suitable for use in public at any time and in any setting. For example, it would seem insensitive for a non-African American to be speaking before a largely African American audience and say "I think it is a good thing when a public official is 'niggardly' with our money." If "niggardly" were used several times in such a presentation, there is little question but that many in the audience, both African Americans and non-African Americans, would feel uncomfortable. It would also seem imprudent for a non-Asian American to say "It is a 'chink' in our armor that we should nip in the bud," when speaking before a largely Asian American audience. A societal awareness of the effect of certain words on specific groups may result in a restricted use of offending phraseology.

It is of interest to note that David Howard concluded that his choice of "niggardly" in describing a tight budget was insensitive and that he should not have used it.

Society has respected the feelings of African Americans who claimed they were stereotyped in caricatures like "Little Black Sambo" and expressions like "a tough monkey." Society must also give similar consideration to all minorities, when they voice objection to particular acts and situations. Just as only African Americans know how it feels to hear the word "niggardly," only Asian Americans know how it feels to hear the expressions "Bamboo Network" and "The Asian Connection," and only Native Americans know how it feels to hear the terms "redskins," "squaw," and "redman"—and to see the names "Indians," "Chiefs," "Warriors," "Blackhawks," "Braves," "Seminoles," "Cherokee," "Navajo," "Apache," "Winnebago," "Pontiac," "Cadillac," and "Crazy Horse" symbolized in sports and advertising.