

# NATIVE PEOPLES

The Arts & Lifeways

Summer 1996  
Aug/Sept/Oct

We Have No Name for  
Art • Woven by the  
Grandmothers • Spirit  
Weavers of the Darién •  
Mississippi Band of  
Choctaw • German  
Silver • Brazilian  
Comic Art



U.S. 4.75 CANADA 5.75

62





NATIVE PEOPLES is dedicated to the sensitive portrayal of the arts and lifeways of native peoples of the Americas. The magazine is published in affiliation with:

The National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution  
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center • Crow Canyon Archaeological Center  
Eiteljorg Museum • The Heard Museum • The Iroquois Indian Museum  
Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial Association • The Montclair Art Museum  
Southwest Museum • Atlatl

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FRONT COVER "There I am!" Sophia Lovato proclaims proudly of her SELF PORTRAIT. Tewa children learn to express themselves through their artwork. Photo by Bruce Hucko. Story on page 28.





## GUEST ESSAY

By Dolph Hatfield, PhD



Our society can be a sensitive and responsive one. It has responded to civil rights involving African Americans, Hispanics, and women. Why then is our society so blind to the racism faced by Native Americans? The most visible examples of this racism are the uses by professional, college, and high school teams of names, mascots, and insignias that are extremely demeaning to Native Americans—the Washington Redskins being a prime example.

By what authority can the term “redskin” be considered an extremely racist word in today’s society? The dictionary, of course, serves as the final authority on the meaning of words or upon resolving a disagreement over semantics. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Third Edition, 1992) defines redskin as “Offensive slang. Used as a disparaging term for a Native American.” Interestingly, “nigger,” “spic,” and “kike” are also defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as “Offensive slang. Used as a disparaging term for a Black person, a Hispanic person, and a Jewish person,” respectively. Other dictionaries give comparable definitions.

Given the treatment of the term “redskin” by the dictionary, the Washington Redskins might as well be called the Washington Niggers, the Washington Spics, or the Washington Kikes. Society would be outraged by such a suggestion. Why then does the name Washington Redskins not evoke the same outrage? The reasons most certainly lie in the fact that many Americans are not aware of the definition of the term “redskin” or they **want** to believe that this term means strong, brave, and courageous. Others feel that Native Americans are “just too sensitive” because, after all, non-Native Americans are only having some “good, clean fun.”

But who should decide what is demeaning and therefore racist? Clearly, the affected party determines what is offensive. It is not for unaffected members of society to dictate how the affected party should feel. Advertising characters such as “Little Black Sambo” and the “Frito Bandito” are no longer acceptable in society because African Americans and Hispanics have let it be known that such expressions carry racist overtones. These slogans cannot be more offensive to African Americans and Hispanics than “redskin” is to Native Americans. With regard to being overly sensitive, how can Native Americans

be “just too sensitive” to a word defined in terms equally as demeaning as other racist terms? And how can they be “just too sensitive” to a word whose history conveys so many painful memories?

Newspapers and television sports programs play a major role in how society perceives the meaning of words. As long as the news media use “redskin” in a propitious manner, their followers will continue to associate this word with favorable attributes. If society were to become aware of the fact that “redskin” is as racist as the terms “nigger,” “spic,” and “kike,” there is no doubt that the use of the word would terminate.

Members of the sports media have a responsibility to recognize the offensiveness of this word. In turn, they have an obligation to share that awareness with the public. It should be noted that at least two major newspapers in this country, *The Portland Oregonian* and *The Seattle Times*, have accepted the responsibility of educating the public on such issues by refusing to print names with racial overtones or to use words such as “redskin” or “redman.”

Other nicknames of professional and college teams, such as Indians, Braves, Chiefs, and Seminoles may not in themselves be offensive. However, the portrayal of these words is often very demeaning. For example, the baseball teams that played in the 1995 World Series—the Cleveland Indians and the Atlanta Braves—with Chief Wahoo as the mascot for the Cleveland team and the “tomahawk chop” exemplified by fans of the Atlanta team, portrayed Native Americans in an extremely degrading manner. Suzan Shown Harjo, Director of the Morning Star Institute, says that this portrayal of Native Americans is “racist, derogatory, demeaning, pejorative, offensive (and) ignorant at best.” Dr. Cornel Pewewardy, a visiting scholar in the Department of Education at Cameron University, has written extensively about the struggle of unlearning ‘Indian Stereotypes’—for both Native Americans and non-Native Americans—as learned from the demeaning public portrayal of the American Indian through mascots, the movie, *Pocahontas*, and the “tomahawk chop.”

Our society must become aware of how very racist the word “redskin” is and how very derogatory the portrayal of the Native American is in so many commercial and sporting endeavors. Society must respond quickly with the complete eradication of such usage in public. This nation can become a far more caring and responsible society by manifesting greater **awareness** and by being more **responsive** to the feelings and rights of Native Americans. 