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OVERSIGHT HEARING ON “STOLEN IDENTITIES: THE IMPACT OF
RACIST STEREOTYPES ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE”

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairman Akaka, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. My name is Charlene Teters; I am a member of the Spokane Nation in Spokane Washington. I am honored to serve as a senior faculty in Studio Arts at the prestigious, Institute of American Indian Arts. We have amongst our student body, some of the brightest young talent and future leadership for Native America. These young people are among our best representation of our native nations and our culture.

Let me first share with the committee a short personal story that brought me to speaking out about the impact of racist stereotypes on Indigenous People. I was one of three American Indian students recruited to the University of Illinois' (UIUC) masters program in studio arts in 1988. When I received my letter of acceptance, it was a dream comes true; to pursue an advance degree in studio arts, a dream that soon became a nightmare. When we were recruited, not one of us asked.... what is your mascot? Who would think that you would need to ask that question? Our university systems must be places where all peoples' identity is respected. What the three of us witnessed was anything but honoring or respectful of Indian people.

We witnessed a university community deeply embedded with AI stereotypes because this publically funded university's creation and use of “Chief Illiniwek” as its' mascot. We witnessed sororities and fraternities playing with things central to our spiritual way of life while drinking heavily. We witnessed the mascot dance to Hollywood's version of our drums and songs. Found images meant to represent Indian people on welcome mats,

wallpaper, whiskey bottles, toilet paper; anything these stereotypes could be put on it was, and if it could be sold at a profit the university licensed it.

The student body at UIUC numbers was near 45,000. Once one of the three of us, meaning the only three students on campus who could prove they were American Indian, criticized the use of our culture for the university's athletic identity the push back was fast, furious, harsh, threatening and devastating. In no time there were few public places that felt remotely safe. We could not go out to eat, buy groceries, gas, the mall, a movie, let alone a sporting event without being told how unwelcome we had become. I, with young children in public school, heard and saw the emotional assault that took place on my 2 children. While UIUC is a very large university, it exists in a small college town. In the end one of three left, another and I stayed, but not without being effected for life.

There were those who stood with us. Organizations familiar with the struggles of people attacked for what they were born: AJC, NOW, NCAI, AIM, SCLC, SPLC, and others, who at a distance lent what support they could. Close in there were the courageous: YWCA, African American House, and Progressive Students Alliance. These may have been small, but in a sea of hostility, welcome support.

These community and often tax-supported stereotypes are the definition of "Tyranny of the Majority," not simply because American Indians are such a small segment of the general population, but because this gateway racism comes in under the guises of community good, community identity. Candy coated for children and consumption, profiting adults and organizations, woven into the fabric of everyday life, it is tortuous for those who have bought in to see the horror of racism in these images they love and cheer. However, these grinning "Little Red Sambos" dig at the pain of history, the reality of religious and cultural oppression and hurt both Indian people and the prospects of reconciliation. No one really comes out ahead where racism sets the table.

I have been asking myself what can I add to this discussion at the level of the United States Senate. There are many who may be better trained to speak of institutionalized

racism, those better trained to speak about social impact, emotional impact, spiritual impact, even financial impact. But this struggle for freedom from organized insults, public ridicule and national collusion is my story. It is Indian people's story. I believe one day these stereotypes will be looked upon with the same distain and wonderment that Frito Bandito, Sambo and other effigies of historic racial attitudes are seen today. No one is clamoring to return these symbols to American's popular landscape. These Indian symbols and mascots are no different.

Often in cases of symbols, as these seen as innocuous, the question is asked, "what harm do they do?" A thing can be wrong without a quantifiable injury to be pointed at. With that said, I want to share with the committee my experience with my family, students and friends made along the way. Serious depression and suicidal tendencies are rarely spoken of in the moment. It was many years before I heard from others how close my own children came to taking suicide as a way out of the pain. For them they were attacked and bullied at school and in public both for who they are, and of course who their parents are. Others unrelated to the conflict that raged in Illinois felt the pain deeply, too. Just last month I spoke at the University of Utah and discovered how devastated many of the few Indian students there feel, some in deep depression, at least one genuinely suicidal.

University of Utah Utes. Here is a case where it may well be that a tribal council is playing along to get along. Fill in the blank: "do you mind being my _____?" Even the question is repugnant, frankly, its' cowardly.

It may be difficult for those of mainstream persuasion and socialization to understand the impact of daily insults on even a strong psyche. Already the isolation an American Indian student can feel separated from tribe, community, familiar customs and faces is all too real when attending a university, or moving to an urban setting. Too few make it through the educational system to the post-secondary level. These stereotypes and community attitudes are an unnecessary burden, a burden that can be alleviated by elimination of these symbols.

But the daily insults are not limited to athletic team identities. Well documented are the film stereotypes that continue to be introduced to new generations through cable and Internet. Screenwriters continue to use “Chief” and derogatory references from a time some feel has gone by. Deeply concerning is the continued use of American Indian references by the United States military. General Norman Schwarzkopf telling the world that Desert Storm was “like going in to Indian country,” hardware and weapons names, and now we who are Indian can not escape “Geronimo” is dead and all the other proclamations we will now have to endure in the moment and in the future. Did anyone stop to think, would American Indians want to be synonymous with Osama bin Laden? I think not. This United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs has picked a salient moment to ask the question, why not!

Not only do we not ask the question: should we continue today as we have done in the past with these ever present relics of racism; should we continue to mascot American Indians. We do not ask what else happens as a result. To me the answer is plain as day, too few if any who roots for this Nation’s capitol Washington Redskins asks how American Indians feel when the opposing fans yell “kill, beat, defeat... the redskins!” no one ever asks the question. We who have answered it without having been asked understand how few want to know. As a nation we appear not to want to hear the answer, so the question is avoided.

In part I am here today to ask this question, how do we ask American Indians who serve in uniform, who have sacrificed life in defense of this young nation in so many wars in so many places, to reconcile the irreconcilable, to defend the indefensible, and to do so with dignity, honor and commitment. Is it possible that at this moment of national triumph that the deepest insult was not delivered upon al Qaida abroad but to a small population here at home. And if anyone, who will apologize?

Before this land was the United States, it was the homeland of many Indian nations. And yet, many American’s know very little about us. We survived manifest destiny not just physically, we are here culturally. As parents and as teachers, we work hard to instill in

our children a sense of pride in our culture, our stories, our names for ourselves, our historical heroes. Like Pontiac, Chief Joseph, and Geronimo and yet we find we must compete with mass media's image, or the military's use of our historical heroes as code for the country's enemies.

History plays an important role in defining acts and practices as racist, regardless of the intent of the larger community group. When the history is one of domination and subordination as is the history of the Indigenous people in the US, then what counts is how the minority group understands its portrayal. History is very powerful, depending on who is telling the story. It can be used to demobilize a people or it can be used to inspire. When the administration uses our historical heroes name "Geronimo" in connection with military action, it takes from us, our heroes.

CONCLUSION

There are more than 500 Indian Nations within the United States. All have their own rich history, language and culture. To turn us into stereotypes is to stop seeing us as individuals and traps us in someone else's mistaken idea of who we are. These images are so powerful that many non-Indian people do not see us as modern people with a valued history, living culture and language or a future. When school teams use us as mascots it goes against education's highest goals. These schools' graduate people who go on to become, teachers, judges, governors, and presidents who impact native communities, no matter where we live. When the United State military uses these terms and symbols it goes against its greater honor. Our military discharges people who go on to become, teachers, judges, governors, and presidents who impact native communities, no matter where we live.

Many American Indians have done their part to win the hearts and minds of their neighbors. Now it is time for our national government to do its' part. This may not require new laws. This does cry out for action.