



MANDAN, HIDATSA & ARIKARA NATION
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Testimony of Hon. Tex G. Hall
Chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara Nation
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On
Mascots, Stereotypes, and Native Americans

Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
May 5, 2011

I am testifying today on behalf of the Mandan, Hidatsa & Arika Nation and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association.

I wish to thank the Committee and the Chairman for bringing this important topic into the public spotlight. As you know, where I am from, this is quite the controversial issue. The University of North Dakota's continued use of the name and image of "The Fighting Sioux" has landed us in the middle of a national media firestorm.

Too often though, the debate rages all around us, while we, the First Americans, often have the last word. I hope that this hearing will bring our voice to the forefront of the debate and provide some clarity and guidance for schools and people across the country.

As you know, there are many who view the use of Native American images by colleges or universities to be heroic, spirited, or just generally positive. On the other hand, there are many others who argue that the use of such images as promotes negative stereotypes, which can be offensive, demeaning and insensitive.

While I cannot speak for every single Native American in this country, I can speak from my experiences as a schoolteacher, sports team player, coach, and tournament administrator, as well as the elected leader of my tribe and a representative of many more.

Position of the MHA Nation and Great Plains Tribes

My position, and the position of my Tribe, and many others is this – we find the use of Native American mascots to be dehumanizing and disrespectful. I have submitted a resolution passed last month by the Great Plains Tribal Chairman’s Association supporting the NCAA’s efforts to eliminate the use of American Indian mascots, and supporting the University of North Dakota’s Senate, the University’s Student Senate, the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education and the North Dakota Senate Education Committee’s call to stop the University from using the “Fighting Sioux” nickname and logo.

UND Fighting Sioux Controversy

As you know, the University of North Dakota reached an agreement with the NCAA in 2007 to stop using the nickname and logo by August 15, 2011, unless it received approval from two of North Dakota’s tribes – the Spirit Lake and Standing Rock Sioux Tribes. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has been firmly opposed to the use of the “Fighting Sioux” and thus the University, if it is to comply with its own promise, must stop using the name and logo this year.

This situation has been complicated by a law passed this year by the North Dakota Legislature, and signed by the Governor, requiring the University to keep the “Fighting Sioux” name and logo. The law has also raised the issue of whether the North Dakota Attorney General will sue the NCAA.

The NCAA just reminded the University that nothing has changed since 2007 and that the settlement agreement still stands. And, since the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has not authorized the University to keep the Fighting Sioux mascot, then the University has to no choice by to abide by the terms that it agreed to and retire the Fighting Sioux mascot. Otherwise, the NCAA could impose sanctions including barring UND teams from hosting post-season tournaments or wearing proscribed attire during those tournaments. The NCAA also said that in its view, the North Dakota law “cannot change the NCAA policy nor alter the contracted terms of the agreement.”

As I testified earlier, our tribe and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman’s Association stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe on this issue and call on the University to start shopping for a new mascot and logo.

Our Concerns

My Tribe’s concerns arise out of our concern for our children. We believe that every child has the potential to be a great leader, athlete, scholar, president, or medicine man or woman.” We try and teach them that nothing can hold them back. But at the same time, we recognize that there are forces built on institutional racism and economic reality that can sometimes hold them back. My administration is built on hope and opportunity and one thing that we can do something about is challenging negative cultural stereotypes.

The sad reality is that most mascot names that refer to Native Americans reinforce negative cultural stereotypes: Redskins, the Fighting Sioux, and the grossly demeaning Cleveland Indians logo. We want to make sure that all of our children have the opportunity to create his or her own image for themselves and not have images created for them, whether by the universities, high schools, or the media.

The American Psychological Association summed up this issue by stating:

“The use of American Indian mascots as symbols in schools and university athletic programs is particularly troubling because schools are places of learning. These mascots are teaching stereotypical, misleading and too often, insulting images of American Indians. These negative lessons are not just affecting American Indian students; they are sending the wrong message to all students.”

- Former APA President Ronald F. Levant

We believe that the use of Indians mascots create a negative environment for our Native American students, and other students too, by creating a hostile learning environment, by reaffirming negative stereotypes of American Indians that most of us grew up with, and by grossly misinforming students (and adults) who have had no or little contact with Native Americans in the first place. The negative environment perpetuated by Indian mascots undermines our cultures, our traditions, and our spirituality. And, as with most forms of institutional racism, the use of those images are perpetuated by institutions which have power.

And that is why I am glad to be here to speak to these powers. And that is why I am glad to have your support and friendship, Mr. Chairman, and Committee members. Together, we can fight power with power.

To this end, I would like to remind the Committee that we do not stand alone. The National Congress of American Indians, the National Education Association, the American Psychological Association, and the NCAA stand with us.

Conclusion

NBA legend and University of North Dakota graduate Phil Jackson asked the University not too long ago, “What is to be gained by keeping the Fighting Sioux. “ The “objectification of people is limiting to ourselves” as well as to the people we objectify. “We have a chance to do the right thing.”

We have a chance to make a change for the better, to make our children’s’ lives richer and to lift the bonds of oppression surrounding them.

I hope that the University of North Dakota, and all schools, do indeed take the chance and do the right thing.