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# Myths and Stereotypes About Native Americans

Most non-Indians don't know a great deal about the first peoples of the Americas, Mr. Fleming avers. But what's worse is that much of what they do "know" is wrong.

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**BY WALTER C. FLEMING**

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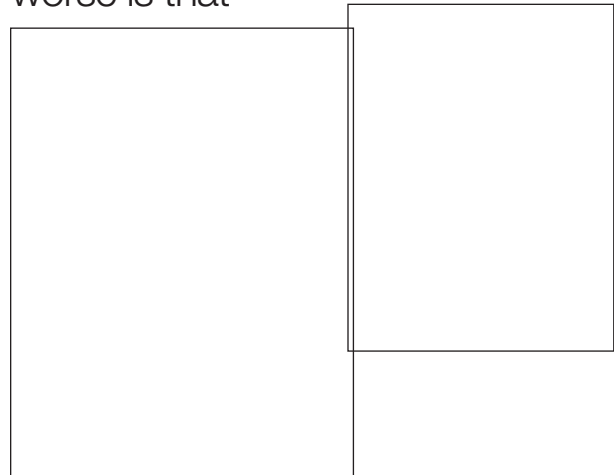
**W**HEN IT comes to Americans' knowledge about Native American culture and history, one might say there are two types of people — those who know nothing about Natives and those who know less than that. That's not exactly true, but most Americans are not very familiar with the first peoples of the Americas. Though some might argue that it is wholly unnecessary to have any knowledge about Native peoples, most would probably agree that some exposure to Native perspectives is a good thing for students. And Americans probably believe that it is the responsibility of the public education system to provide that exposure.

Because many people have such a limited knowledge of Indians, we are, arguably, among the most misunderstood ethnic groups in the United States. Native Americans are also among the most isolated groups. Thus the knowledge that most people have about Indians does not come from direct experience. What people know is limited by their sources of information — and, unfortunately, much of the information about Indians is derived from popular culture.

Even in areas where the concentration of Native peoples is high — say, in the West — most people do not know very much about the history and culture of the first citizens of their region. Even if non-Indians are familiar with Indians, the impressions they have of Native people can be

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quite negative. In fact, in states like Montana, the expression "familiarity breeds contempt" is descriptive of the tensions between Native and non-Native people.

Stereotyping is a poor substitute for getting to know individuals at a more intimate, meaningful level. By relying on stereotypes to describe Native Americans, whites come to believe that Indians are drunks, get free money from the government, and are made wealthy from casino revenue. Or they may believe that Indians are at one with nature, deeply religious, and wise in the ways of spirituality.

I do not intend to dispel all of the stereotypes or address all of the many myths about Native peoples; instead, I'd like to offer my perspective on the most important considerations that teachers and others might keep in mind when assessing curriculum, developing lesson plans, or teaching Indian children. Many of these myths may seem ridiculous, even silly, but each one is encountered by Native people

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on an almost daily basis.

**Myth 1. Native Americans prefer to be called Native Americans.** One of the most significant conversations with students seems to be the most basic. The first question people often ask me, as a Native person, is, “What do you want to be called?” Often, this is asked in the interest of political correctness, but as often it is a sincere question. There are several choices — including “Native American,” “American Indian,” and “Native” — and good arguments for, or against, using any one of these.

“Native American” seems to be the preference in academic circles. In my own writing or lectures, I am accustomed to using “Native American” in reference to the first peoples of this country (although in conversation I’m more likely to use “American Indian” or “Indian”). I am unapologetic in my use of these terms and don’t find it necessary to spend lots of time (save in this article) explaining to others why I do, or do not, use one term or another.

“American Indian” and the shortened version, “Indian,” have long been the subject of debate. Some Natives point out that the term “Indian” is an unhappy legacy of Christopher Columbus’ so-called discovery and that the term is, therefore, a legacy of the subsequent colonization of the lands of the Native peoples of the Americas.

In Canada, the term most widely used to describe aboriginal people is “Native.” Again, as with “Native American,” one can argue that we are all *natives* of our respective countries of affiliation.

This discussion does not have any resolution. We, as Native people, are quite schizophrenic about it ourselves. In my own case, I’m likely to use Native, Native American, Indian, and American Indian quite interchangeably, sometimes even in the same sentence.

But all of these terms have one thing in common. They imply that there is some meaning to be derived from the term of choice, whatever that might be. For example, the terms “American Indian jewelry” or “Native American religion” in reality do not convey much information about more than 500 cultural beliefs or practices. Does “European” suggest a common history, culture, or desire? Does “Asian” mean that all those rich traditions can be so easily described?

As much as possible, I try to use tribal names, when known. Thus Squanto and Massasoit were Wampanoag leaders, and Sitting Bull was Hunkpapa Lakota. Though they can be referred to as “Indian” leaders, common sense suggests that these individuals had little in common.

Educators speak often about “teachable moments.” Perhaps the discussion about what terms to use in reference to Native peoples can be part of a wider discussion about

identity in America. Certainly, there are common points about the use of terms like Hispanic, Asian Americans, African Americans, and so on that can be productive in trying to understand this creature called “American.”

**Myth 2. Indians get special privileges.** One stereotype strongly held in Indian Country<sup>2</sup> by non-Indians is that Indians receive special privileges that other American citizens do not. The 7 June 2006 electronic edition of the *Findlay* (Ohio) *Courier* shared this editorial opinion:

It’s long been apparent that the laws granting Native American tribes sovereign nation status were a huge mistake. Rather than improving the lives of native people, the laws have created a state of dependency in which the tribes are neither truly sovereign nor fully a part of the larger nation. They are essentially wards of the federal government. They receive some special privileges designed to advance their welfare or maintain their native culture, but for the most part, the laws have made dependent victims of people who should have been integrated into the larger culture.

The editorial concluded, “We’ve foolishly allowed the Native Americans special tribal privileges, which has benefited neither them nor the nation as a whole.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Courier* editorial did not describe what those “special tribal privileges” might be. But from long experience, I can surmise that the writer meant education, medical care, and money, all for free. Moreover, many believe that Native peoples do not pay taxes.

The reality is more complicated, and these assertions are based upon half-truths. Suppose it is true that Natives receive financial support for education. According to recent data, 63% of all undergraduate students in the United States received financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants, subsidized loans, and work/study.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these students are, in fact, non-Indians. Yet no one claims that these non-Indian students are getting a “free education.”

Native students qualify for these same sources of funding. They may receive scholarships from their tribes or, as low-income students, qualify for federal Pell Grants. Some states offer fee waivers to Native students, but they also offer similar waivers to medical students, war orphans, senior citizens, dependents of prisoners of war, National Merit Scholarship semifinalists, and so on. The public seems to accept the propriety of granting waivers to children of Vietnam veterans but calls Indian fee waivers “special privileges.” It is understandable then that many Natives consider the protests about these so-called special privileges to be based on race.

Those who are concerned about “special privileges” do

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not understand the nature of the relationship between Native tribes and the American federal government. Tribes signed treaties with the federal government that grant certain rights in exchange for the cession of land. Therefore, many of these “privileges” are considered treaty obligations. In the many treaties that tribes signed with the federal government were provisions that the government would provide education and health care to the tribes in exchange for the millions of acres of tribal lands. So education and health care have been “bought and paid for” by Native ancestors.

Some tribal members are indeed exempt from some taxes. The reason is logical and legal. Federal reservations are not part of the states in which they reside. Therefore, some American Indians who live and work on a reservation do not pay state taxes. But they pay other taxes, such as federal income taxes.

**Myth 3. American Indians are a dying race.** I met someone once who asked about my racial identity. I replied, “I’m a member of the Kickapoo tribe.” He exclaimed, “I thought they were all dead!” This would certainly be news to my 1,600 fellow tribal members, but it does illustrate that many believe in the myth of the “vanishing red man.” There is a well-known bronze sculpture titled “End of the Trail,” by James Earle Fraser (circa 1918), which shows a dispirited warrior astride an equally dejected war pony. He seems threatened by extinction. At the time of the creation of the sculpture, population estimates for Native peoples showed that the American Indian population was, indeed, on the decline. Census data for the year 1900 enumerated approximately 237,000 Native Americans, Eskimo, and Aleut peoples, thought to be the nadir since 1820.<sup>5</sup>

As of 1 July 2003, the estimated number of people who were American Indians and Alaska Natives or American Indian and Alaska Native in combination with one or more other races was approximately 4.4 million.<sup>6</sup> This is hardly a sign of a dying race.

**Myth 4. American Indians are easily identifiable.** In truth, not all American Indians fit the physical stereotype. Not all are dark skinned (and none actually have red skin) with high cheekbones and black hair tied up in braids. Some Indian people are blond-haired and blue-eyed. Some have the features of African Americans.

An Indian child in the classroom may, by appearance, look like all the others. It is best not to make assumptions about ethnic identity solely from outward appearance. Even if the child is Native, he or she is first an individual.

**Myth 5. All American Indians live on a reservation.** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 538,300 American Indians and Alaska Natives, alone or in combination with one or

more other races, live on reservations or other trust lands.<sup>7</sup> This also includes those who live on historic Native lands in Oklahoma and state reservation lands. In all, 57% of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in metropolitan areas.

It is true, however, that in some states in the West — like Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah — the majority of Native people do live on or near an Indian reservation.

**Myth 6. Native people intuitively know their culture and history.** Native children are not born with an intimate knowledge of their heritage. That may seem silly to say, but teachers sometimes assume that a Native child in the classroom is the gateway to indigenous information. Our children must learn their native language as well as the stories, cultural practices, and ideals of their people just as we, their parents, learned them.

Sadly, some Native children know nothing of their tribal cultures, for a variety of reasons. Some come from families in which the parents are members of different tribes. Some parents do not know their own cultures because they were products of the boarding school system that discouraged traditional customs and traditions.<sup>8</sup>

A well-intended teacher may call on a Native child to supply information about Indian culture or history. The teacher may feel that giving the child center stage will enhance his or her self-confidence. Yet the teacher may be acting on invalid assumptions. First, the child may not know his or her own language, history, or heritage.<sup>9</sup> Second, some tribes value discretion and the non-disclosure of some aspects of tribal life. Third, some Native students feel that they cannot speak for anyone other than themselves. And, finally, traditional cultures sometimes teach that a child should not attempt to “outshine” his or her peers. So it’s best not to put a Native child on the spot.<sup>10</sup>

**Myth 7. American Indians feel honored by Indian mascots.** There are elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities that have adopted Indian mascots, nicknames, and symbols. A number of these schools have come under scrutiny in their communities, and nationally, because many Native people and organizations say these portrayals are offensive and demeaning. More troubling is that many people do not understand why Indian people find these characterizations offensive.

The arguments about mascots and nicknames cannot be resolved here. However, it is important to understand the issues. The obvious offenders use offensive images of Native people, such as the Cleveland Indians caricature, Chief Wahoo, which many will recognize as a buck-toothed, fire-engine-red-skinned figure with a huge nose and grin to match.

The Cleveland baseball organization contends that Chief Wahoo is meant to be a tribute to Louis Francis Sockalexis, a member of the Penobscot tribe who was the first American Indian to play professional baseball. The club insists that Chief Wahoo is only a caricature and is not meant to degrade Indian people. Yet this caricature, in its present form, is insulting to Native Americans. Sadly, many will not reach that conclusion simply by looking at the logo in question.

Because it is difficult for non-Indians to understand the Native perspective on this issue, activists have had to rely on non-Indians' familiarity with and sensitivities to other ethnic cultures. One particularly effective cartoon shows four team logos. One is the Cleveland Indians logo; the others are logos for the fictional Cleveland Asians, Cleveland Africans, and Cleveland Hispanics. Each shows a cartoon figure grinning, literally from ear to ear, with enormous nose and teeth.<sup>11</sup> There would be no question that African Americans, Hispanics, and people of Asian descent would find these logos extremely objectionable. So why, in the face of obvious objections from Native people and their assertion that they do not feel "honored," is this symbol allowed to represent the Cleveland baseball team? Most commonly, the defense of the logo is that it's a cartoon, not a "real" Indian. Others support Chief Wahoo in defiance of what they believe is political correctness gone too far. Finally, there's the rationalization that "my best friend's cousin's brother-in-law is one-fourth Cherokee, and he doesn't think there's anything wrong with Chief Wahoo."

Some Natives find the names Cleveland Indians and Washington Redskins to be likewise objectionable. Certainly, no African American would want to play for a team called the "Cleveland Sambos."

## MOVING BEYOND STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes, some believe, have a basis in reality. They can be a product of oversimplification, exaggeration, or generalization. Their harm is that they define an individual by attributes ascribed to the group as a whole. So the stereotype that American Indians are doomed to become alcoholics obviously colors one's impression of the many who do not drink alcohol at all.<sup>12</sup> So, too, the stereotype of all American Indians as "spiritual" — even though this may be perceived as a positive image — does not encompass the beliefs or practices of all individuals.

The challenge for educators is how we get beyond stereotyping. The answers are complex but must surely include more than adding a sidebar to a social studies text or in-

cluding a Native American unit around Thanksgiving.

John Watts has suggested the following "best practices" for those teaching Native students at the college level.<sup>13</sup> They are also applicable to teachers of Indian people at any level.

- Practice personal warmth plus high expectations.
- Respect cultural differences.
- Learn the cultural resources of your students.
- Develop multiple instructional approaches.
- Be aware of the ways you ask questions.
- Remember that some students do not like to be "spotlighted" in front of a group.
- Be aware of proximity preferences — how close is comfortable?

Such suggestions are common sense. There are many excellent resources for educating children about stereotyping, but the key is awareness.<sup>14</sup> Learning about other cultures, their histories, and their beliefs gives students a basis for judgment that goes beyond generalizations.

1. The terms Native American, American Indian, Indian, Native, and so on are used interchangeably and refer to aboriginal peoples of the United States and their descendants.

2. In legal terms, "Indian Country" refers to Indian reservations, Indian communities, and Indian allotments (U.S. Code, Title 18, Part I, Chapter 53, § 1151). In general usage, it refers to reservations, regions, states, and communities where there is a significant Native population.

3. "Courier Editorials: Sovereignty," *Findlay (Ohio) Courier*, 7 June 2006, [www.thecourier.com/templates/opinion/editorials/editorials.asp](http://www.thecourier.com/templates/opinion/editorials/editorials.asp).

4. "Demographic and Financial Aid Data for the U.S. and Minnesota," Minnesota Office of Higher Education, retrieved 21 June 2006 from [www.ohe.state.mn.us](http://www.ohe.state.mn.us).

5. Walter C. Fleming, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Native American History* (New York: Alpha Books, 2003), p. 290.

6. "American Indians and Alaska Natives Number 4.4 Million," International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, retrieved 10 July 2006 from <http://usinfo.state.gov>.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Captain Richard C. Pratt, founder of the Indian Boarding School System, encapsulated the ideals of that educational philosophy when he said, "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

9. Native languages are in jeopardy. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 71.8% of all American Indians and Alaska Natives speak only English at home. See "We the People: American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States," CENSR-28, February 2006, <http://www.census.gov>.

10. For more on dealing with Indian children in the classroom, see John Watts, "Native American Students," Teaching Learning Committee, Montana State University, Bozeman, 2003, [www.montana.edu/teachlearn/Papers](http://www.montana.edu/teachlearn/Papers) (click on "culteralsens.html").

11. For a downloadable representation of the cartoon, see [www.bluecorncomics.com/pics/auth.gif](http://www.bluecorncomics.com/pics/auth.gif).

12. Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) notes that, though the alcoholism rate among Native Americans is higher than in the general population, more Indians do not drink at all than in the general population (The Writer's Voice Community Reading, Billings, Montana, 1 November 1994).

13. John Watts, op. cit.

14. Recommended sources that offer discussion, tips, and curriculum ideas on stereotyping include: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Indian in the Classroom: Readings for the Teacher with Indian Students* (Helena: Montana Department of Education, 1972); Devon A.

Mihesuah, *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1996); and Council on Interracial Books for Children, "Stereotyping of Native Americans," Native Nevada Classroom, University of Nevada, Reno, [www.unr.edu/nnap/NT/i-8\\_9.htm](http://www.unr.edu/nnap/NT/i-8_9.htm). **K**

## Indian Education for All: **THROUGH OUR OWN EYES**

# Building on Yesterday, Looking to Tomorrow

**BY CAROL JUNEAU**

**W**ITH THE return of Montana's K-12 public school students to classrooms across the state this fall, teachers are presenting new and exciting instructional programs. Students are learning about American Indians, in particular those in Montana. Teachers from the smallest one-room schools to our largest urban schools will incorporate into all curriculum areas content about Montana's 12 tribes — their history, government systems, fine arts, oral traditions, and contemporary issues.

It is an exciting time in Montana for everyone who has worked diligently for so many years to breathe life into the constitutional promise made in 1972. Indian Education for All (IEFA) has traveled a long and winding road. At times it has been a smooth trail filled with high expectations. At other points, there were unexpected corners and challenging hills to overcome. We even ran out of gas a few times or got stuck in some muddy ruts, where we spun our wheels. Most important, on several occasions, we had to carve out our own road and provide a new direction.

Indian people have understood for a great many years that it is only by educating our young people that we can reclaim our history and only through culturally responsive education that we will preserve our cultural integrity. Through IEFA, non-Indian children will also grow to understand and respect the significance of these issues in the lives of their Indian peers. When the law is fully implemented, K-12 students will learn an accurate and authentic history of our state from all perspectives.

*CAROL JUNEAU (Mandan/Hidatsa) is the state representative for Montana's House District 85.*

Today, Indian people are again hopeful that their history and culture will be respected by our education systems so that Indian students in any K-12 school or college in Montana will see themselves reflected in textbooks. We are optimistic that non-Indian students will recognize diverse cultural heritages and know how Indians contribute to modern Montana. We are confident that all students will learn about the impact of Lewis and Clark on our state's land and future; that Indian leaders will be respected when U.S. leaders are discussed; that treaties made with Indian nations will be recognized as being as valid as those made with foreign countries; that Native contributions to science, astronomy, and medicine will be included in science curricula; that Native music will be included in school concerts; that Native languages will be taught; and that all teachers, whether Indian or non-Indian, will be knowledgeable about American Indians.

This inclusion in the classroom validates the cultural integrity of Indian people. It assures Indian students that they belong and that their school system respects all facets of their learning. It will, I hope, also improve the future of Indian students, because all students in Montana will gain a true and accurate understanding of American Indian history and contemporary issues.

In 20 to 25 years, perhaps a new group of Montana legislators will come together and debate all sorts of issues with mutual respect. Perhaps they, too, will make knowledgeable decisions on behalf of all Montana citizens.

We have traveled far and wide across Montana to see IEFA become a reality in classrooms. Though it has been a difficult journey, we have endured the bumps and breakdowns for the most valuable reason — to grant our children a better, more promising life than our own. **K**

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