
Racism Against Native Americans Must Be Addressed

By Tim Giago
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A column by Raina Kelley, an African American lady, in *Newsweek* Magazine, caught my eye this week. She wrote about the code words used to hide the racism that seems to be permeating the American scene.

Less known in most of America, but well known to Native Americans, is the covert racism that afflicts those Americans with “red skin” as opposed to black.

Let me substitute the word “redskin” for the word “black skin” from one paragraph in Kelley’s commentary. “Red skin has meant something very specific in this country for hundreds of years. It has meant ‘less than,’ ‘not as good as,’ ‘separate than,’ and even ‘equal to.’”

And in those regions of the United States we call “Indian country,” there are few Natives who have not experienced the covert, and oftentimes overt, symptoms of racism. To many easterners coming out west to experience a close encounter of the first kind with “Indians,” it is so easy for them to slip into using the captivating term, “our Indians.” It is almost as if Indians are property, albeit human property, to be possessed by those who would observe, pity, assist or praise them as figments of a vanishing race. Indians can then be safely relegated to the role of mascots for America’s fun and games. They can then be honored for what “they used to be” not for what they are today in modern America. They become warriors, chiefs, redskins and braves, everything but human beings.

White national columnists seldom, if ever, write about Native Americans. If they do, it is usually, perhaps unintentionally, to denigrate, much in the fashion of a George Will or a William Safire, rest his soul. An Andy Rooney can use the most racist of terms in describing Indians on 60 Minutes without ruffling a white feather.

Like Raina Kelly, many Native Americans are “mad as hell” and they aren’t going to take it anymore. Like the movie that coined this phrase, it is easily said, but hard to implement. Why? America does not want to hear about Indians. Native Americans should be left in the pages of history books or in old Western movies. America is not ready for the “tame” Indian yet because there are still many “shoot’um up” Western movies on the horizon and Americans do not want to destroy this false image with reality.

But let a few Natives occupy a peaceful village like Wounded Knee and the press shows up in droves. Visions of “shoot’um up” scenes of the cavalry (FBI) and Indians flood the stories they send back to the home office. The renegades waving rifles in the air make the nightly news.

Just what is racism? Some of it is indeed hateful and meant to hurt. Other aspects of it are strictly from ignorance. "You can't change stupid," was in the title of a column written for *Native Sun News* by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, a couple of weeks ago. Liz has seen the top and the bottom of racism not only in South Dakota, but in all of America. At times it has made her bitter and understandably so. Like me she gets angry and frustrated in having to explain right and wrong to non-Indians over and over and over, ad nauseum. But how are we going to change stupid if we don't keep trying?

My weekly column on indianz.com, nativetimes.com, or on Pechanga.net, is read mostly by Native Americans who know Native America and respond accordingly. But I find it terribly frustrating trying to figure out the readership on huffingtonpost.com, where my weekly column also appears. I run into a totally different kind of audience at Huffington. For the most part I am dealing with ignorance, but it seems to be an ignorant audience that not only does not want to learn, but also does not give a damn about Native Americans. Now that is frustrating. But please do not think I mean all readers of the Huffington Post, because there are some that are extremely knowledgeable and don't mind pointing out any mistake I might make.

Raina Kelley wrote a powerful column that pulled no punches. She is angry at a white America that pretends or fails to understand (this is the ignorance I mean, not a book ignorance) that there is an onslaught, or maybe I should say an abundance, of racism today and much of it appears to be pointed at President Barack Obama.

No one really wants to say it and those that have said it have found themselves lambasted to the umpteenth degree.

Let me conclude with, yes, there is racism against Native Americans in much of America and like the racism against African Americans; it needs to be dragged out from under the rug and addressed.

Tim Giago, an Oglala Lakota, is the publisher of Native Sun News. He was the founder and first president of the Native American Journalists Association