

# The “Chief Illiniwek” Half-Time Show

## What’s Wrong with It and What People Did about It

Demetrius Wade

### Is this Mascot Racist?

In 2006, when I was a sophomore at the University of Illinois, I heard people saying the school’s mascot “Chief Illiniwek” was racist towards Native Americans. At first, I struggled to understand why. But then I began to look into other cultural stereotypes, such as “Sambo” and “black face,” and I began to see their point.

According to Encyclopedia.com, “Sambo” characterizes black men as “passive buffoons” and is a “form of denigration.” As a stereotype, it has been used to “justify the inhumane treatment of slaves, provide a rationale for Jim Crow segregation,” and use racism to entertain white audiences.

“Black face” refers to make-up worn by white or even black entertainers in “minstrel” shows. The make-up exaggerates black features and ridicules black people as a form of entertainment. Professor Blair Kelley writes that minstrel shows “desensitized Americans to the horrors of chattel slavery.” They encouraged audiences to laugh at slavery and to think of it “as an appropriate answer for the lazy, ignorant slave. Why worry about

the abolition of slavery when black life looked so fun, silly, and care-free?”

It didn’t take me long to see that the “Chief” was the exact same thing. He misrepresented an entire culture for the entertainment of white people. Many of these white people



don’t think too much about how their ancestors may have contributed to the genocide against Native Americans, yet here they are being entertained by a stereotype “Indian” just as they were entertained

by a “stereotype” black person in black face.

In Native culture, ritualistic dancing is very sacred. Depending on the tribe, Native Americans feel that dancing connects them with sacred spirits. To take something so personal and culturally sacred, and parade it around like it’s something funny and designed for the consumption of a bunch of sports spectators is clearly not only insensitive but also downright disrespectful.

More than 20 years ago, Native American groups and supporters started protesting the Chief Illiniwek mascot. You might think that people would have some empathy for the Native Americans who did not want to see their culture ridiculed in this way. On the contrary, students, alumni, and supporters of the university were outraged that they might lose their mascot. Alumni even threatened to stop making contributions to the university if the mascot was discontinued.

### To the University, Profit Matters More

At that moment, I realized that I couldn’t expect empathy from people who have never had to deal with being mocked, or negatively portrayed in the media. I also realized the powerful role of money in this controversy. Despite protests, the univer-

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sity stubbornly held on to their mascot for more than 20 years – because they were afraid to lose the money from their alumni network. Apparently they were more afraid of losing money than they were of being viewed as an institution that tolerated and supported the use of racist images.

The university didn't start to change until the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) threatened to ban the university from hosting playoff games if the mascot was not eliminated. In August 2005, the NCAA called "Chief Illiniwek" a "hostile or abusive" mascot and banned the university from hosting post-season activities as long as it continued to use the mascot. There is a ton of money to be made by hosting playoff games, and the university did not want to lose out. So finally, the Chief was banned – *not* because it was the right thing to do and *not* because it perpetuated Native American stereotypes. The Chief was banned because it was more profitable to get rid of him than it was to keep him.

### Mascot Banned but Racism Lingers

From 1927 to 2007, the Chief was played by 38 people but never by anyone of American Indian heritage. This mostly made-up character was not based on an actual American Indian chief, nor did a historical figure with this name ever exist. There was nothing factual about this character, which is

fitting because there is also nothing factual about the stereotypes that it conveys. The University may have rid itself of the mascot for the wrong reasons, but we should still count the university ban as a victory. It shows that pressure works and change can happen! However, there is still work to do. The local community keeps the mascot going by putting the Chief's image on clothing and accessories. Remnants of the Chief, just as remnants of racism, linger.

*Demetrius Wade, who is part Native American, is a student at the University of Illinois/Urbana Champaign. He is majoring in English with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies. He is from the south side of Chicago, and both his parents were addicted to crack cocaine. He will be 29 when he graduates because he has had to take time off for financial reasons. He wants you to know: it's never too late to get your education.*



**Sources:** <www.ais.illinois.edu/documents/Gone-IlliniwekArticle.pdf>, <www.encyclopedia.com> <councilofchiefs.org/history>, <thegrio.com/2013/10/30/a-brief-history-of-blackface-just-in-time-for-halloween>, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chief\_Illiniwek>, <www.dailyillini.com>.

**AFTER YOU READ:** What is the role of money in the university's decisions regarding the mascot? Find an activity related to research and using sources at: <changeagent.nelrc.org/issues/issue-42>.



*This poster was created by the National Congress of American Indians. It includes one real sports mascot and two fake ones. The caption under the poster reads, "No race, creed, or religion should endure the ridicule faced by Native Americans today. Please help put an end to this mockery." Which is the real mascot? Which ones are fake? Do you find these mascots offensive? Why or why not?*