

# Editorial and Opinion Page

## Editorially Speaking

### Little Change Noticed in Daily Newspaper's Treatment of Native Americans Since Changes in Leadership There

The article reprinted below entitled "Junk About Indians," appeared in the daily newspaper, the *Robesonian*. Many people have called us and commented on the content of the article. We agree with those who have contacted us. It was absolutely the worse piece of journalism relative to Indians we've ever read. We will not at this time try to correct Jeffrey Hart, the syndicated columnist who wrote the article. Sometimes people are just so ignorant that the best thing to do is to acknowledge their ignorance and move on. Obviously, Hart's article will not change the course of history, nor will lies become truth just because they are published. Other than those few comments, we feel that Hart has been adequately addressed by the letters to the editor written by Chancellor of UNCP, Dr. Joseph Oxendine, and Dr. Stan Knick, Director of the Native American Resource Center on the UNCP campus. We have taken the liberty of reproducing the original article by Hart as well as the two letters to the editor by Dr. Oxendine and Dr. Knick.

We will confine our comments at this time, editorially speaking, to the seeming anti-Indian mentality of the *Robesonian*. We certainly believe in the First Amendment and Freedom of Speech. We have no qualms with Hart's writing the article. If he's ignorant, and he is, let him publicly say so... which he did.

However, we had hoped that the changes in management and editors at the *Robesonian* would bring about some positive changes in the coverage of news in the county. We read the editor's editorial response to the article. He reminded us, again, that he was bound to print the article because of a contract with King's Syndicates. He spoke again of the First Amendment. We will not debate that issue with him. We thought it interesting, as you notice that the original article had no name. The next day the *Robesonian*, after having been contacted by several irate readers, we understand, put a small correction in that listed the author, Jeffrey Hart and made sure those

who noticed the correction understood he was a syndicated columnist. Okay! For as long as some of us can remember and even before that, according to the records, the *Robesonian* has failed to be fair and unbiased towards Indian people. That is a matter of public record. At one time, Indians made up more than 50% of their subscription list. We understand that recently those numbers have declined. We expect that they will continue to decrease.

The editor of a newspaper can use common sense and discretion in deciding which articles he will run. Considering that Indians are the majority of the population in this county, the editor could have chosen not to run the article, syndicated or otherwise. If he chose to run it, he could have cleared the leadership of the newspaper by a simple disclaimer. Since he chose not to offer a disclaimer and only editorially tried to explain it after the fact, and because he chose to run it without the author's name, we can only assume that there were some subtleties and nuances implied. We were not surprised either by the article or by the decision of the editor to run it. The *Carolina Indian Voice* has said for many years that the *Robesonian* is biased against Indians and they continue to give us reason to substantiate that belief.

For instance Mike McIntyre, newly elected Congressman for the seventh Congressional District has dominated the front page of the daily newspaper on several occasions. Yes, we admit it is newsworthy to have the Congressman be a resident of the county; and his moving to Washington, D.C. is decidedly a big deal. We have told Indian people time and time again that we should not spend out money with the *Robesonian* because they do not treat us fairly. The recent coverage of Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Dexter Brooks' swearing in was only one more indication of bias, in our opinion, against Indians. More coverage was given to Judge Floyd who was also recently sworn in as a Superior Court Judge. There is a great deal of

difference in the two.

Recently, as one more example, Ronald Revels of St. Pauls was arrested for possession of stolen vehicles. He made the front page and a lengthy and detailed article was written. Again, we do not argue with the fact that the story should have been covered. But always the negative news concerning Indians rates more prominent placement and detailed coverage than any of the positive news. This is proven in the pages of the daily newspaper.

When the county commissioners passed a resolution not to advertise with the daily newspaper, immediate changes were made. John Bauer came in from out of town to keep the newspaper, we assume, from losing any more money. They had no problem telling the radical O.H. Lewis that he could no longer write his "Reality Check" column. But at the same time, they say, they had no choice but to publish Hart's article. Did freedom of speech not apply to Lewis? Or is that right restricted to those writers who denigrate Indians? Anyway, we call on Bauer editorially to appropriately apologize to Indians for the lack of respect shown to them in the daily newspaper. We can see no reason for the publication of the article and especially no reason not to print the culprit's name. The perception is there no matter what the correction says. I am sure that newspaper would not consider printing a letter from an Indian that was derogatory to whites in this county with out a name. We ask them publicly when the staff of the daily newspaper will more adequately reflect the racial make up of the county. To our knowledge, there is still only one Indian employed at the *Robesonian*, other than those who distribute the daily to news stands and boxes. Until those things change, biased news coverage, lack of minority employment, and fair coverage of all three races in the county, we publicly again say to our readers: *do not spend your money with the daily newspaper*. They do not appreciate, apparently, your patronage and the article by Hart, in our opinion, is a reflection of their true feelings about Indian people. They obviously do not like us.

## Junk thought about Indians Racism still alive — and well

The schmaltzy idealization of the American Indian has become an industry.

The actual American Indian of history has been lost in an orgy of civilization-bashing.

We have "Native American student" courses in the universities, commercial movies such as "Pocahontas" and notably now Ken Burns' nine-part PBS series, "The West."

American culture has long idealized the Indian in harmless ways. In the Boy Scouts, I entered as a "Tenderfoot" and thought about Indians moving silently over dried leaves and paddling birch-bark canoes.

I tried to make a fire with flint and twigs. The Indian has adorned our currency and given his name to cities and athletic teams.

But what we are now seeing is different. Those "Native American studies" courses are almost always anti-European and also anti-historical.

Often, as in the Ken Burns documentary, the wish is explicit that the Indians had not been defeated and that America would revert to pre-Colonial times. It amounts to a bogus wish that modern civilization did not exist.

Of course that cannot be brought about. Pol Pot tried, and look at what happened. For centuries before the Indians ever saw a white man, they slaughtered one another in bloody tribal warfare.

When the Europeans arrived, there commenced a long war of about 150 years. The Indians lost decisively.

The Indians were by no means "native" to America. At the end of the Ice Age, they crossed from Siberia on a land bridge that existed between the continents.

The Indians are Asians. Then they worked their way down from what would become Alaska and encountered a resident people now known as "Mound Builders" because of the large earth structures they left.

The nomadic warriors from Siberia extinguished the Mound Builders, and then fought each other

...I only say that I can see no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth."

Abraham Lincoln

for centuries.

The reasons why the Indians lost the long war against the European settlers were not mainly technological.

Soon the Indians had muskets and horses, and later, on rifles.

They were excellent riders and fighters.

They could have formed a united army of some sort to do battle, but that was far beyond them.

They were a Stone Age tribal people, the tribes hating one another as much or more than they hated the whites. (Look at Africa today.)

In fact, the most warlike tribes, such as the Sioux, the Comanches and the Apaches, were so savage that other tribes often joined the whites against them.

Among the young braves of the warlike tribes, fighting was the most honored activity, and the only route to honor, booty and captured women.

Any Indian chief with an impulse toward peace would have been regarded as an old woman and replaced.

Similarly any chief who tried to form a coalition with other tribes.

The whites did not win because of rifles and horses, but through better organization and steadiness of purpose.

The frontier advanced steadily against the nomads, farms were established and forts built to protect the settlers.

The Indians lost the long war because their overall culture and Stone Age tribal organization were inferior and could not prevail.

That is the consensus of serious historians, and it is reiterated in the December issue of *Commentary* magazine, in a fine article by Walter A. McDougal.

As McDougal indicates, the Indians had another position besides

fighting.

They could have rejected tribalism and its ethos and assimilated to 19th century Western civilization. Indeed many of them did, and their descendants today live among the rest of the Americans.

McDougal has come up with a remarkable quotation I had not seen before.

Writing to the Cheyenne chief Lean Bear, Abraham Lincoln put the matter with his characteristic grace and realism:

"I really am not capable of advising you whether, in the providence of the Great Spirit, who is the Father of us all, it is for you to maintain the habits and customs of your race, or adopt a new model of life.

I only say that I can see no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth."

So, the Indians lost the war.

The Scottish Highlanders were destroyed after the Battle of Culloden in 1745 for the same reasons.

It is utterly frivolous to wish that the Indians had won.

One may blanch at the barbarities committed by both sides in what was usually guerrilla warfare, but that is the nature of guerrilla warfare.

History is not a videotape.

There is no "reverse" button. Rome was overrun.

The Aztecs lost. The Highlanders lost. The Indians lost.

The Confederacy lost.

I doubt that Ken Burns would go to a witch doctor instead of a modern physician.

The Indians had no written language and had not invented the wheel.

There comes a time when historical realism has to break in and when the kidding has to stop.

Editor,

At a time when public portrayals of the American Indian are finally assuming a more balanced approach, along comes Jeffrey Hart to put an end to all of this. Mr. Hart's "Junk thought about Indians" (*Robesonian* 12-28-96) revives the negative characterization of American Indians with a list of stinging rebukes seemingly designed to put the Indian back in his place.

Mr. Hart is particularly critical of the positive images of the American Indian, as presented by Ken Burns' PBS series *The West*, the movie *Pocahontas* and "Native American" courses being taught in universities today.

In fact, he is troubled by the mere term Native American, stating that "the Indians are Asians."

While professing admiration for Indian images in what he refers to as "harmless ways," i.e. Boy Scout adventures such as canoeing, primitive fire-making and pretend stalking — and even in the naming of today's athletic teams, Mr. Hart is troubled by more serious depictions of Indians as real people in today's world.

He characterizes serious discussions of American Indians as "anti-European" and "civilization bashing." Native American studies in universities are described as "almost always anti-European and anti-historical."

It is not clear that Mr. Hart has ever taken such a course.

Mr. Hart states repeatedly that "the Indians lost the war." Further, he is compelled to add that the reason the Indians lost the war was "because their overall culture and Stone Age tribal organization were inferior."

Even so, where is it written that military victory over a people on their homeland renders justice and humanitarianism irrelevant?

Mr. Hart is compelled to demean the character of the American Indian by stating that they could have united to fight the European settlers, "but that was far beyond them."

This reflects not only the arrogance and mean-spiritedness of Mr. Hart, but a lack of understanding that there were more than 500 distinct tribes on this continent and not simply "a group of Indians."

It may surprise Mr. Hart to consider that the indigenous people of

this continent were so naive in early contacts with non-Indians as not to imagine that they should organize themselves for a military onslaught by other human beings.

In fact, their approach was to reach out to early settlers, including the Pilgrims, to teach them how to survive on this continent.

In a further criticism, Mr. Hart blamed the Indians for engaging in "bloody tribal warfare" prior to the Europeans' arrival.

It would be comforting to think that non-Indians did not engage in such hostilities.

Unfortunately bloody warfare seems to have been commonplace among humans through the years, dating back to Cain and Abel.

Further, there is no evidence that American Indians were any more warlike than other cultures.

Mr. Hart has a clear concept of what the Indians should have done earlier and what they should do today: "They could have rejected tribalism and its ethos and assimilated to 19th century Western civilization." O

Obviously, it follows that immigrants from Africa, Mexico, Israel and Japan should likewise rid themselves of their cultural values and traditions and blend into the European ethos.

Such standardization of cultural behaviors would certainly bring comfort to Mr. Hart and others who yearn for a society of sameness.

But, what of the freedoms of individuals and groups and what of the beauty that cultural diversity brings to the whole of American society?

In my view, it is unthinkable to encourage a race of people to reject their cultural heritage.

Today's American society is moving toward a greater interest in sharing cultures and celebrating diversity as a means of unifying and strengthening without complete assimilation or separation.

Assimilation itself can create unhealthy power differentials through the implication that the assimilators are king and the assimilated subjects, laggards forever in the business of full citizenship.

"Junk thought about Indians" seems to have no purpose other than to create animosity where none exists and to exacerbate hostilities which may be prevalent.

This is a 1950's style racist diatribe which we can well do without in 1997.

Joseph B. Oxendine  
Chancellor, The University  
of North Carolina at  
Pembroke

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## Article filled with inaccuracies

Editor,

An item on your editorial page (Dec. 28, with the caption "Junk Thought About Indians") claims to support "historical realism," but is full of inaccuracy.

The conspicuously uncredited author (did he not wish to have his name published?) could benefit from taking the Native American studies courses he so glibly denigrates.

There are more historical inaccuracies in his article than can possibly be treated in the brief format allowable in this newspaper, but here are responses to a few of his more outrageous assertions.

While certain popular segments of American society have idealized Native American culture, most scholars take a more holistic view. Native American studies courses at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (and elsewhere) are not, as the author claims, "anti-European" and "anti-historical."

Is it "anti-European" to analyze multiple perspectives of history?

Is it "anti-historical" to challenge popular misconceptions and question the intent of writers who were bound by the prejudices of their times?

The nameless writer says Indians were not "native" to America.

This is like saying Europeans were not "native" to Europe because their ancestors came out of Africa.

From an anthropological perspective, genus *Homo* could be seen as only "native" to Africa, and to have migrated everywhere else.

The fact remains that Native Americans have been on this continent at least 15,000 years longer than anyone else, and thus it doesn't seem such a misnomer to speak of them in relative terms as "native."

The nameless writer says Indians came to America and "encountered a resident people now known as "Mound Builders" and subsequently "extinguished" them.

The erroneous notion that the moundbuilders were not themselves Indians was dismissed by serious scientists many decades ago.

Mounds of various types and purposes were built by Native Americans during the last 3 to 4,000 years of their pre-European habitation of the continent.

But one of the most egregious historical misunderstandings is reflected in his assertion that Europeans were able to conquer the continent "through better organization and steadiness of purpose."

The writer fails to mention that a great portion of the damage was done by European diseases which decimated Native populations.

Here in the East, where Europe made its earliest colonial footholds, diseases such as smallpox and measles reduced the Native American population by 75 to 90 percent, making it relatively easy for the colonies to continue their expansion westward.

It may be true, as the nameless writer states, that Indians "had not invented the wheel."

They had also not invented a way to kill hundreds of thousands of people in an instant.

But they had worked out a cultural harmony which allowed them to live successfully without doing any serious damage to the environment. To say that the "overall culture" was "inferior" to that of the Europeans reaches to the heights of ethnocentrism, which is another word for ignorance.

Stanley Knick  
Rowland

Editor's note: The omission of Jeffrey Hart's byline with his column that ran on Saturday was the mistake of The Robesonian. Mr. Knick, when informed of this, was asked if he wished to amend his letter. He declined.

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