

Native Americans Today

This is a transcript of the [original audio version](#) by Jeffrey Vanderziel.

Today, the number of Native Americans actually is the highest it's been in probably a century and half. There are about four million people in the United States today who claim some degree of Native ancestry, and about two million of them identify solely as Native people.

Even most American, I think, still have this image of American Indians as living on reservations. But today less than a half of all American Indians live on reservations. Most American Indians are living in towns and cities, dispersed into American culture and American society. So for those living off the reservation, the issues that they're challenged with, that they face are the same as challenges that any American would face, you know, issues of class and wealth and income equality, and educational opportunity. For those people living on reservations... What happened in 19th century of course, is that many reservations was, the land that was left to the Indians, that was the land really that white settlers weren't interested in, wasn't perceived as having value. And so today, Native American reservations are quite remote, they often have very poor infrastructure, lack of job opportunities, so unemployment on some Native American reservations is as high as 70 percent. On some reservations, basic housing, lack of indoor plumbing, no toilet, no running water, up to 50 percent of households. Not telephones, no cellphones, no paved roads. So economic opportunity is missing, poverty is prevalent, widespread. And most people living on reservations are often dependent on government support, which is at a very minimal level. So issues for Native peoples still today are economic development, as in how do we bring jobs to the reservations.

For some groups, particularly those located close to large American cities, an important aspect of economic opportunity for the past 25 years has been casinos and gambling. And so particularly those groups, that by chance, historical chance, are located near to large urban centers, like in Florida or California, or in the North East, they've been able to establish casinos that are quite profitable. And make quite a bit of money. So for example the Seminole Nation of Florida, one of the best examples, they have a series of casinos, in Florida, which enabled them to accumulate wealth. And they used that wealth for example to buy the Hard Rock Café chain. So Hard Rock Café, even in Prague, is owned, in fact, by the Seminole Nation of Florida. And that's brought wealth to that group. But to groups like the Lakota, living in South Dakota, in a very remote, isolated reservation, they have a small casino, but it barely breaks even, because there's no one to visit it. Casinos need patrons. So economic development is an issue.

And one of the issues that deals with that in the past, most of the economic development that has taken place on the reservations, has been in the form of resource extraction. Extracting natural resources from the land. Coal, uranium... Much of the uranium that was used in the American nuclear weapons program to build the bombs that were used in the second world

war, and throughout the Cold War, came from Native lands. From American Indian lands. But it wasn't being mined by the Native people, so it's being mined by big corporations who brought in miners, to exploit the uranium, or the coal, and then when that was no longer needed, or they've been exhausted, they left. So for example one of the bigger problems on the largest reservation, the Navajo reservation of Arizona and New Mexico, where about 120 thousand of Navajo Indians live, is that much of the ground water is polluted with uranium. So cancer and diseases related to that, both people and – the Navajo are sheep herders, one of their primary industries is sheep herding, so the sheep will drink from these natural water sources that are contaminated with uranium. But people also have to drink that water, because there is no other source of water. So this creates problems, and the government hasn't forced these companies to clean up. Native governments don't have the money, or the resources, to do it, so this creates problems of when the economic development happens, it's often not for the benefit of the local communities, but for the benefit of large corporations.

Another important issue is the recognition of treaty rights. And one of the things that most people know is that the American government, and the Canadian government, signed with many groups treaties, throughout the 19th century. And in many cases, they broke these treaties, or ignored these treaties, almost right away, but the treaties still exist. And so some Native groups have been very successful in for example asserting their right to fish for salmon without control by the state or federal governments. And it's been very important for their communities. But those kinds of successes are quite small, even, and recently there was the Dakota access pipeline, DAPL, which was a pipeline that would go from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico to bring oil from Canada down to refineries in America. And it was supposed to cut across North Dakota, and go under the Missouri river, just north of one of the very large reservations that exist in North Dakota, called Standing Rock. The local Indians were concerned that this pipeline could present a threat to their water source. So they protested. And there were sittings and large demonstrations, and a camp was made, several thousands people camped out through the winter to try and prevent this pipeline from being built. And before he left office, president Obama said no to the pipeline, so he stopped it, but the current president, one of his campaign promises was to build the pipeline. So when his administration came in, he reversed that, and gave permission to start building the pipeline. Just within the last two weeks a judge has stopped it again. So economic development and resource exploitation are of course important.

And then one of the other big issues for Native peoples, where they come into direct contact with American culture, is the use of imagery. Particularly in sports. The most people here are familiar with the ice hockey team the Chicago Blackhawks. Who are actually named after – Blackhawk was a real person. A real individual. But it's not his image that's on their dress, it's a made-up imagined image of a noble savage, with a feather head dress. There are of course baseball teams, and of course there are football teams, that also use this kind of imagery. Now this imagery was present throughout all levels of American sport. High school, secondary school, colleges and universities, and professional sports. It's been more or less eliminated from universities, so universities that used that imagery, with a couple of small exceptions, have abandoned it, have given it up, are no longer using it. The couple of exceptions are where the universities have agreed with the local group that they can use that

imagery. So for example the Seminole again, so Florida State University, historically, their mascot are called the Seminoles, and they've agreed with the Seminole Nation that they can continue to use certain kinds of imagery in certain ways. And so that's okay. Other groups, like the University of North Dakota, were called the Fighting Sioux. And they wanted to keep their imagery, but the local Sioux groups in North Dakota said, "No. We don't want you to use that imagery. We don't want you to use that name." So they've given up both the name and the imagery. In some states, like California, the government has banned high schools from using mascot names like Indians, or savages, or red skins, or red men. In other states it still exists, but there's pressure at the high school level to remove that kind of imagery.

But the area where it's most entrenched in is professional sports. So we have ice hockey teams, we have baseball teams, the Cleveland Indians, who use this kind of imagery, the Atlanta Braves, again, who use this kind of imagery, and of course the most notorious example is the football team based in the nation's capital, based in Washington D.C., who are called the Washington Red Skins. And red skin is a pejorative term, an insult, this is probably the worst kind of insult that you can say about a native person. It's be like using the N word for an African-American. And so there's been pressure brought on Washington to change their mascot. But there is really no mechanism by which they can be forced to change their mascot and their imagery. The owner has said, "I'll never give it up, I'm keeping it, it's part of OUR heritage." So this is where this idea, so they've said the term "red skin" ISN'T an offensive term anymore, it's now part of our heritage, it's our term, our heritage, and it means the things that we assign it to mean. And so this creates this conflict with Native peoples, who have been pushing back and forth, so this whole long debate about what to do with the Washington Red Skins.

But the most recent Supreme Court decision did not deal with the Washington Red Skins, it actually dealt with a band, a rock band, an Asian-American rock band, who called themselves The Slants. Like slanted eyes. So there, you know, that's one of the stereotypes about Asian people, they have slanted eyes. And they wanted a copyright, because the reason that the term red skin is important, and the image is important, is because the man who owns the team owns the copyright. So he can sell merchandise with that imagery, and make money. If the images aren't copyrightable, then he doesn't own the image, then he can't make money off the merchandise. And this is a part of the reason why the Czech ice hockey dress, the uniform, has changed. Because the ice hockey federation couldn't copyright the dress, as it was, because it was the state seal, it was the state symbol of the Czech republic. And so they couldn't do that. So they wanted another image, that they could own. And that they could then sell and make money off of. So up until present, anyone could make a dress, a Czech national ice hockey uniform dress. Anyone could do it. Because no one owned the image. No one owned, no one had the copyright.

So the point was – the band were Asian Americans, they were Asian Americans, who wanted to call themselves this, in part to point out the stereotype. And they were denied the copyright. The government said, "No, you can't copyright this name". So they sued. And it went all the way to Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court last year said, "Well, copyright is a matter of free speech." So their copyright was recognized. So this implies that the red skins,

or other pejorative terms, can be used and copyrighted. So, you know, we could make a copyright about, we could use a derogatory term for Jews, or for Italian Americans, you know, so I could make a team called the Spicks, which is a derogatory term in the United States for Italian Americans, a spick. And that would be okay now. Whereas two years ago that wouldn't have been possible to have a team like that. Or to have a name like that copyrighted. And then sell things that say that. So this is where free speech comes in, and, you know, what is free speech and how much free speech is too much free speech? And how much is not?