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## **Reach out to American Indians the other 364 days of the year**

By Andrew L. Yarrow

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Inevitably and sadly, Thanksgiving is the one day of the year when American Indians cross the minds of most other Americans. Other than at our yearly commemoration of Pilgrims and Indians giving thanks, in early elementary school, in occasional movies or as tourists in the Southwest, most Americans give about as much thought to - and have as much knowledge of - their country's first inhabitants as they do the people of Outer Mongolia. This needs to change.

While America's 298 million non-Indians generally express good will and considerable sympathy about past injustices and present poverty afflicting Indians, they largely view the nation's Indians as relics of a past that ended with Custer and Wounded Knee. Or, because of lack of knowledge, they frequently see them through a caricatured and stereotyped lens forged on old Hollywood back lots. For the most part, they are oblivious to the vibrancy and difficulties of present-day Indians' lives and culture, or to their social and legal status, a recent study of non-Indians' thinking about American Indians by Public Agenda has found.

Despite some recent, politically correct romanticizing of Indians as spiritual, and model environmentalists, to most Americans, knowledge and thinking about Indians begin and end with Pocahontas and Sacajawea (good) and half-formed notions about primitive savages and alcohol-riddled reservations (bad).

The good news, according to the report, "Walking a Mile: A First Step Toward Mutual Understanding" - one of the most exhaustive attitudinal studies ever done on this subject - is that non-Indians want to be better informed about Indian life today and in the past. (Indians, also surveyed, strongly second that sentiment.) The bad news is that there is very little public education about America's native people out there.

After centuries of post-1492 microbial and military decimation, and further generations of discrimination, Indians largely have vanished as historical actors on the U.S. stage, at least in the minds of most non-Indians. When asked what comes to mind when they think of Indians, many non-Indians ticked off such images as teepees, wampum, warriors,

casinos and alcohol. They picture Indians as "stoic," "brave," "fierce" or "spiritual," sporting ponytails and wearing exotic dress and jewelry.

Although two-thirds of America's Indians live in urban areas, and only a half-million inhabit reservations, in non-Indians' minds, Indians exist only on "the res." This perception flows into one of poverty, unemployment and social pathology. Nevertheless, many non-Indians - particularly those who live close to Indian populations - resent the perceived "preferential treatment" and "loopholes" to establish profitable casinos that Indians receive, and are opposed to large-scale public funding.

Indians are painfully aware of their invisibility and bitterly resent the stereotypes and ongoing sub rosa prejudice against them. Contrary to non-Indians' beliefs that Indians are coddled by the U.S. government, the Public Agenda study found that many Indians feel that they are still victims of government policy, and that supposed governmental largesse is actual public stinginess. They also sense an ongoing devastation of their culture, symbolized by such diverse phenomena as using Indian land in Washington state for the Hanford nuclear-waste reservation to portrayals of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day as holidays implicitly celebrating the subjugation of Indians.

Although Indians believe that much needs to be done to redress widespread poverty, unemployment, poor health and low educational attainment, they are also proud of their cultures and justifiably prickly about unawareness of their successes in professional, urban, middle-class America. Yet, even there is a rub: Many Indians feel they straddle two worlds, torn between their historic cultures and modernity, and between identities as Indians and as Americans.

Clearly, more sophisticated education about Indian life is needed. It should not be relegated to third-graders. And memory should not be left to the fourth Thursday in November. It should be integrated into curricula throughout high school and college. Media and popular culture need to do more thoughtful portrayals, and not simply report on Indian crime and substance abuse, or continue to craft dramas with either old, disparaging or new, flattering stereotypes.

The lives of urban and other non-reservation Indians, many successful, need to be showcased. Museums, too, need to go beyond natural-history-cum-anthropological displays that reinforce the notion that American Indians are a dead culture, denizens of pre-1890 America - and improve upon potentially outstanding institutions such as the National Museum of the American Indian.

As a starting point, as one Indian said, "Maybe you should just tell them that we still exist."

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