Article 24

Who Is a Native American?

PETER ORTIZ

George Armstrong Custer predicted Native Americans soon would be extinct before he ordered his soldiers to kill them at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. Just as Custer discovered in his fatal encounter with Lakota and Cheyenne warriors, the native tribes proved resilient in surviving impossible odds.

More than 4 million U.S. citizens in 2003 identified as Native Americans, either alone or in combination with another race. This is a little more than 1 percent of the total 294 million people living in the United States, far fewer than the 10 to 25 million believed to be living in North America when European settlers arrived about 500 years ago. Those settlers spread fatal diseases, imposed genocide, forced assimilation, stole land, broke treaties, destroyed cultures and committed other crimes that ravaged indigenous societies.

Centuries of dehumanization resulted in the educational, economic and health disparities evidenced by Native Americans today. But refusal to succumb also nurtured a strong will embodied by many Native Americans who now comprise more than 560 federally recognized tribes and nations spread across 34 states and 140 more tribes applying for federal recognition.

That strong will has empowered Native-American entrepreneurs and those in the corporate world to thrive in a society where mainstream values sometimes run counter to their traditional beliefs. Yet Jackie Gant's frustration is clear when she speaks of how many people only envision slot machines and blackjack tables when they think of Native Americans as an economic force.

Gant, national executive director of the Native American Business Alliance, met Bush administration officials in the White House in September to let them know of the 10,000 Native-American-owned businesses listed in her database. Her organization's mission is to create networking opportunities and promote Native-American businesses as suppliers to corporate America and government agencies. Her group has the support of corporate sponsors including United Parcel Service, Ford Motor Co., General Motors, DaimlerChrysler, Toyota, The Coca-Cola Co., General Mills, Target and The Walt Disney Co. At the meeting, she tried to convey the strength of a people who saved the first white settlers from starvation and influenced the founding fathers in shaping the Constitution. Gant is a member of the Oneida Nation of the Thames, Canada, and Munsee-Delaware Nation.

"As I stood, I felt the weight of Indian country on my shoulders and I knew the words I spoke needed to be heard," Gant says.

Gant and other Native Americans have made great strides in dispelling myths and bringing attention to their issues, but the widespread ignorance of their history still pervades the highest levels of leadership, up to and including the president himself. President Bush displayed a lack of knowledge on the most crucial issue facing Native Americans—sovereignty—when he was asked in August what tribal sovereignty in the 21st century meant to him.

"You are a . . . you have been given sovereignty, and you are viewed as a sovereign entity," Bush told journalists of color gathered in Washington, D.C.

Bush's response rang hollow and was reminiscent of the countless false promises many white men have made to Native Americans over centuries. Sovereignty speaks to the right of Native Americans to control their own land where they are free to shape their economic and spiritual destiny and maintain their traditions and culture. The lack of substance and depth in Bush's answer typified the harmful perceptions, attitudes and actions that have persisted for centuries among white leaders.

Those who say that the wrongs of the past are history and that it is time to move forward frustrate Native Americans, for it is the ignorance of history that defines their present situation and continues to threaten their future. Forgetting and ignoring the past is not an option, but Native Americans live in a white man's world. Their challenge lies in enlightening non-Natives about their history, traditions, cultures and rights as distinct governments, while creating a prosperous future on their own terms.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Entrepreneurs, such as Margaret Rodriguez, demonstrate the strong desire of Native Americans to succeed. A member of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian community in Arizona, Rodriguez started her company, Au Authum Kí, 12 years ago when bankers refused to lend her money. Her company generated $24 million in revenue for 2003. Au Authum Kí translates into "the people's home."

Rodriguez's projects have ranged from a $1.9-million contract for rebuilding a high-tech structure to house a weather squadron at a Tucson Air Force Base to having her workers camp within the Grand Canyon, where they installed portable classrooms on the Havasupai reservation. She also started a charity last year that builds homes for members of her tribal community who can't afford them.

The entrepreneurial spirit isn't unique to Rodriguez as the economic muscle of Native Americans continues to grow, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth and the U.S. Census Bureau. Americans who identified themselves solely as Native Americans and Alaska Natives numbered 2.4 million and 4.1

Table 1 Top 10 Native-American States by Population

California	683,922
Oklahoma	394,831
Arizona	327,547
Texas	239,907
New Mexico	202,529
New York	186,024
Washington	164,642
North Carolina	139,223
Florida	134,036
Michigan	123,322

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

million when they identified with one or more races, according to the 2000 census. Most Native Americans, 43 percent, lived in the West, while 11 states comprised 62 percent of the Native-American population.

Despite their small population, Native Americans are expected to see their buying power jump from $47.7 billion in 2004 to $65.6 billion in 2009. Native Americans will account for 0.6 percent of total U.S. buying power in 2009, up from 0.5 percent in 1990, according to the Selig Center.

The 2001 Survey of Minority Owned Business Enterprises by the Census Bureau reported 197,300 Native-American- and Alaska-Native-owned businesses in the United States that employed 298,700 people. From 1992 to 1997, their numbers increased 84 percent, compared with 7 percent for all U.S. businesses.

But even with successes such as Rodriguez, much of the attention remains focused on gaming. Gant, a Harvard University graduate, credits some casinos for pulling tribal members out of poverty when little economic opportunity existed. About 201 of the 562 federally recognized tribes are engaged in gaming, but most are small operations that provide a few jobs to members in dire need of work. Casinos and gaming operations must be located on tribal lands, and federal law dictates that tribes use gaming revenue to fund services, such as education, law enforcement, tribal courts, health care, social services and infrastructure improvements.

Native Americans must live in a white man's world. Their challenge lies in enlightening non-Natives about their history, traditions, cultures and sovereign rights, while creating a prosperous future on their own terms.

Casinos also have helped spur new small businesses. But the reality is that most Native Americans don't benefit from casinos. About 60 percent live outside of reservations, with the rest living on tribal lands or bordering rural areas. A report by the National Congress of American Indians shows Native Americans ranking last or near last on nearly all social, health, education and economic barometers. Their poverty rate from 2001 to 2003 was 23 percent, similar to that for African Americans and Latinos, while the poverty rate for whites and Asian Americans was about 10 percent. About one-third of the Native-American population on reservations live in poverty. From 2001 to 2003, Latinos, at 32.8 percent, were the only group to surpass Native Americans, 23.8 percent, for those without health coverage.

Native Americans also continue to struggle because of the federal government's early attempts to educate them with a total disregard for their culture. Children were prevented from speaking their language, practicing traditional customs and wearing indigenous dress. Native Americans were not taught the reading, writing and math skills of their white peers and instead were steered toward trades that did not guarantee a secure job because of racial barriers.

About 75 percent of Native Americans 25 years and older earned a high-school degree or more, compared with 84 percent of the U.S. population in 2002. About 14 percent of Native Americans 25 years and older earned at least a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 27 percent for the overall population.

Maggie Necefer remembers when she was forbidden to speak her language as a student in the 1960s. Necefer's Navajo nation established the first tribal college in 1968 and is now among 34 tribal colleges in the United States. She serves as academic vice president at Dine College, which offers 17 degree programs and includes Navajo language and Navajo studies degrees.

"They paid missionaries to put up these schools and the whole intent was to proselytize, to kill the savage and save the man," Necefer recounts of her border school experience. "Oftentimes, we had missionaries come into the schools and tell us what god to believe in."

Necefer kept her language and culture, thanks to her family, and later completed bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs. She represents a model for students; in her, they can see that a Native American can survive from an imposed educational system and retain their culture.

"It is just taking ownership of our own education and what education should be for our people," Necefer says. "We validate the cultural identity and cultural piece interspersed with Western knowledge to prepare balanced individuals who can live in both worlds."

Corporate America's Gap

Much of corporate America, like society itself, does not understand Native Americans. When corporate America is focused on diversity, rarely are Native Americans mentioned in the same breath as African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans, Gant says.

"We are able to compete like any other non-Native organizations, provided we are given the opportunity to do so by corporate America," Gant says.

Stormy Hicks, 58, heeded the advice from his father when he told the then 8-year-old that he was of the Shawnee Nation, but to keep that a secret between the two. Thomas Hicks took pride in his native heritage, regaling his son with stories of relatives dressed in buck skin and visiting him near his tribe's reservation

Table 2 Median Income from 2001 to 2003

Asian Americans	$55,089
Whites	$47,957
Native Americans and Alaska Natives	$34,740
Latinos	$33,913
African Americans	$29,987

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

in West Virginia. But Native Americans in the early 1900s often were denied jobs and faced discrimination.

Hicks is president of ITT Automotive Industries, a company that generates $500 million to $600 million a year in sales and makes fuel and brake lines as well as various plastic parts. For 20 years, he worked at Ford, where he started as a design engineer and ran manufacturing plants in Brazil and Mexico. He retired from Ford as executive director in charge of worldwide logistics and transportation in 1998.

For many years, Hicks kept his Native-American heritage a secret, even when some in corporate America realized the value that people of color brought to their ranks.

"I wasn't embarrassed by it," Hicks says. "In the corporate world, they wanted senior executives who were minorities and I never wanted to give that to the corporations I worked for. I just kept it to myself."

Hicks' wife Elizabeth, who was inducted as a non-native member of his tribe, researched her husband's lineage and urged him to acknowledge his heritage to everyone. He took her advice 10 years ago and regrets not doing it sooner.

"She started to realize there was something missing from my life," Hicks says.

Hicks kept true to his Native-American values even as he remained silent. His struggle speaks to the experiences of many Native Americans who must balance two worlds that have historically clashed from the time European settlers arrived. A legendary chief from Hicks' Shawnee tribe, Tecumseh, echoed the anger of Native Americans when he tried to rally them against white land invasion in the early 1800s.

Hicks did not face the life-and-death choice Tecumseh and many Native Americans grappled with in their fight. But

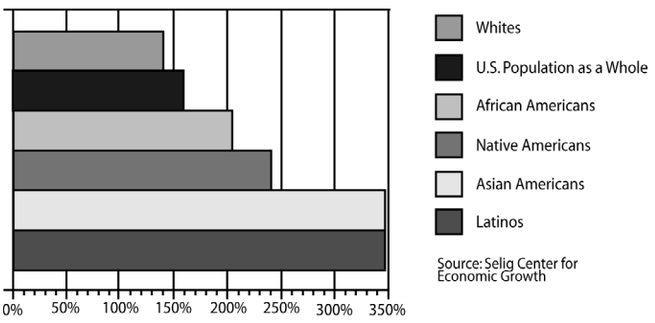

Figure 1 Native-American Buying Power. Projected rate of increase 1990–2009.
Source: Selig Center for Economic Growth

Tecumseh not only called for Native Americans to stand up to white injustice, he also showed compassion by not killing noncombatants. He urged other Native Americans to emulate the same humane treatment. His example survived in future generations.

"I've labored with it throughout my whole career whenever I've had to make big layoffs," Hicks says. "I think as part of Native-American culture, one of our teachings is you always take care of your people, and I'm not sure corporate America does that all the time."

Hicks' success did not come from conforming to the corporate culture, but rather adopting a Native-American approach. He avoided hiring excess employees and trained them in different skills so they could increase their chances of staying employed if layoffs were necessary. Hicks clashed with his supervisors and figures he could be in a higher position if he just played the corporate game.

"I worked with a very senior guy . . . who told me that sometimes I thought more of the people than the bottom line," Hicks recalls. "My response was the people are the bottom line and if you treat them right, they will produce the bottom line you need."

Hicks urges Native Americans entering or in corporate America to find strength in their traditions. "I would tell them to be true to themselves and to their heritage, that the native way does not have to be subjugated by the corporate way," he says.

Tracy Stanhoff, president of the American Indian National Chamber of Commerce, says corporate America and government contractors need to do better to inform Native-American businesses about opportunities and mentorships. Her organization started two years ago and represents the 12-member chamber of commerce nationwide, she says.

Stanhoff is a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation out of Kansas. She sees her organization supporting mentoring opportunities that she did not have when she started her advertising and graphics design business in 1988 at age 26.

"There are lots of issues that have to do with a lack of outreach from corporate America and their diversity departments," Stanhoff says. "We need to step up and say, 'Hey, don't forget about us.'"

Business on the Reservation

Lois Taylor and Barbara Poley steered clear of corporate America when they joined a nonprofit group to help jump-start tribal businesses on their Hopi reservation. The Hopi Foundation has helped the Hopi realize their entrepreneurial spirit without having to compromise traditions by leaving the reservation.

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Maggie Necefer I Dine College

The Hopi reservation occupies 1.5 million acres in northeastern Arizona and many of its residents live in remote areas. The idea for one business, Native Sun, sprung from the objections of many Hopi who did not want a power company's electrical grid crossing over sacred cultural land. Many choose instead to use kerosene lamps and battery-operated lights.

"They did not want to be subservient to a company that would provide them electricity," he adds. "They are staunchly independent."

The Hopi Foundation in 1988 helped start Native Sun, a Hopi-run business that sells solar panels, batteries and equipment. Two years ago, the company became a limited corporation with a majority Hopi board. Hopi living in remote areas are able to harness the sun's energy via solar panels placed on top or near their homes. When banks denied loans to families who could not afford the solar panels, the foundation started a revolving loan fund and maintained "one of the lowest default rates of any institution," Taylor says.

Like many tribes on reservations, the challenges of high unemployment, poor health and inadequate educational opportunities are a daily reality. In some Hopi villages, unemployment can reach as high as 55 percent. Reservations were created by the federal government with the promise of sovereignty and protection. In exchange, Native Americans had to relinquish land as white settlers hungered for more property. The reservations often consisted of the worst land, but today, Hopi and other Native Americans refuse to leave, saying the reservation serves as the spiritual connection to their ancestral roots.

"The Hopi people have a year-long religious calendar . . . and one of the key and important principles was for us to work with micro-enterprises that were compatible with the Hopi lifestyle," Taylor says.

Out of that desire, another business, Gentle Rain Designs, was born. Hopi women already sewing from their homes created the cooperative and now design fleece items ranging from jackets and vests to pillows and purses, all from recycled plastic. The women operate a small shop on the reservation and sell their clothing to boutiques outside the reservation, allowing them to work around their tribal ceremonies.

"If we are going to have survival on our own reservations, we have to build up the capacity and sustainability with businesses we produce on the reservation," Poley says.

Fred DuBray does not dwell on monetary gain when he talks about the growth of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative he directs in South Dakota. DuBray, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, watched the cooperative grow from 1,000 bison in 1990 to 15,000 today with 53 tribes from 18 states participating. The buffalo provide a healthy food source that could help alleviate some of the serious health problems that afflict many Native Americans.

"The most important aspect . . . is recognition that buffalo is such an important and vital part of Indian culture," DuBray says. "If we can't allow them to exist, we probably can't exist as a people."

White settlers knew of the spiritual bond between the buffalo and Native Americans when they systematically tried to wipe out the animal. Native Americans treated the buffalo and other animals with respect and thanked the animals they slaughtered for providing for their families. That concept was foreign to many whites who only hunted the buffalo for food, profit or to further destroy the Native-American way of life.

Cultural Competency: Understanding Native Americans in Business Dealings

PETER ORTIZ

The great divide between Native-American and corporate culture doesn't mean the two sides can't find common ground to conduct business.

One of Patty Dimitrious missions is helping non-Natives understand proper social and business etiquette when dealing with Native Americans. Dimitriou 35, is a member of the Dine (Navajo) Nation and owner of Alternatives/Alternativos, a multicultural advertising agency in Phoenix, Ariz., specializing in Native American and Latino marketing communications. She offers the following suggestions to clients who do business in "Indian Country."

Making your presence known through direct eye contact or a strong handshake can be interpreted as disrespectful and dominating in Native American circles. Dimitriou advises a more modest tack that does not boast of your presence. It's also a good idea to let your Native-American contact know more about your own family background and personal interests. "It's really important to understand each others' roots and background so that we know how to communicate with each other," Dimitriou says. "By sharing where you and your family are from, you support the Native-American custom of building a sense of relatedness."

Dimitriou decided to pursue a degree in communications after leaving her Navajo Nation, in part to help her better understand how to succeed in a dominant white culture. She since has advised non-Natives who are concerned that they might have offended Native Americans at business encounters.

"Say, for example, a developer goes to meet with a tribal council and he really wants to close the deal, so he is . . . trying to be direct and engaging in the type of behavior white America would say is assertive and knowledgeable," Dimitriou says. "But with his conduct, he is coming across as very combative, aggressive and very disrespectful and he creates the exact opposite outcome he is seeking."

And don't be surprised if you stay long at a tribal council business meeting. Dimitriou has heard of visitors who expected to present at a 5 p.m. meeting and waited until 1 a.m. the next morning. But she encourages clients to appreciate the cultural reasons for longer meetings. "One of the things I think is wonderful about Native-American communication is that everyone is invited to speak freely and express themselves without someone cross-talking them," she says. "The most important things are that everyone is in agreement and that everyone has a chance to share."

A big challenge faced by the cooperative is avoiding the idea of domesticating animals, a concept white settlers brought to the Americas. Native Americans viewed themselves, as well as other living beings, as temporary tenants of land that owned them. DuBray says buffalo need to roam freely, as their ancestors did, and that this is necessary to strengthen the spiritual bond they share with the animal.

"We are working toward restoring them as a wildlife resource, not as a commodity," DuBray says. "For them to provide a healthy source of food, they need a healthy source of food themselves like medicinal plants."

DuBray, 54, acknowledges that individual tribes must make tough decisions about how to use limited land. The Native-American way of raising buffalo requires lots of space that some tribal members may want to use for other economic projects. He has 100 buffalo, while his tribe owns several thousand. But despite the success of the cooperative, suspicion remains of the federal government or real-estate interests wanting to take over the land.

"There are still people out there developing ingenious ways to strip away what is left, so we can't let our guard down," DuBray says. "The only promise the white man kept is the promise to take our land. He took it."

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