

## Donald Trump's Speech is not the Worst Thing that Happened at a Boy Scout Event this Summer

Listening to Donald Trump address the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) Jamboree was another example of how unfit he is for leadership and unworthy he is of respect. He used the platform to rail against the media (perhaps the only major US institution blocking the realization of his authoritarian, anti-democratic vision of leadership), attack political opponents, and elicit boos aimed at Former President Barack Obama for not attending a Jamboree<sup>i</sup> while in office (President Obama did record a video message for the occasion in 2010).<sup>ii</sup> Since 1970, Nixon, Carter, and Reagan did not attend Boy Scout Jamborees while George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush did. So, attending a Boy Scout Jamboree is a nice gesture but it is by no means expected that Presidents attend. By way of contrast, Trump has twice refused to meet with the NAACP, bucking 30 years of President tradition.<sup>iii</sup>

As Katie Mettler and Derek Hawkins of the *Washington Post* wrote,

standing before all 40,000 of them, he bragged about the “record” crowd size, bashed President Barack Obama, criticized the “fake media” and trashed Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. In the lengthy 35-minute speech, the president threatened to fire his health and human services secretary if he couldn’t persuade members of Congress to vote for the Republican health-care bill.” His speech bucked eighty years of Presidents avoiding partisan politics on these occasions.<sup>iv</sup>

In response to public concerns about the speech, the BSA released a statement that reasserted its non-partisan public identification ““The Boy Scouts of America is wholly non-partisan and does not promote any one position, product, service, political candidate or philosophy.” but fell far short of critiquing what many believed to be unacceptable behavior on the part of the Mr. Trump.<sup>v</sup>

Despite the cringe-worthy speech, and the troublingly restrained response by BSA, this is not the worst that I have personally experienced from the Boy Scouts this summer. In June, I accompanied my son and his troop to a week-long summer Boy Scout camp. The camp was well run, effectively organized, and inclusive of boys with different developmental and social needs. While my son was one of only 2 Black boys at the camp (with over 60 scouts) and I was the only Black adult, we both participated fully in the activities. In fact, despite being essentially the only Black people at the camp (and among a tiny handful of people of color) after a few days I commented to other adults about the many ways I was impressed.

The culminating event of that camp was an Order of the Arrow (OA) ceremony. The OA is a Boy Scout honor society (Founded in 1915)<sup>vi</sup> that recognizes “Scouts and Scouters who best exemplify the Scout Oath and Law in their daily lives.” Membership in the OA is reserved for certain scouts and is coveted by them (<https://oa-bsa.org>). Parents, Scout Leaders, and Scouts all attended and I was told ahead of time that this was a very special event that I would love. While I was unaware of the content of these ceremonies, I later learned that concerns about the stereotypical representation of indigenous culture have been raised by many.<sup>vii</sup> I now understand why. *The OA ceremony was the most blatantly racist cultural appropriation I have ever witnessed.*

To begin with, an all-white group of Scouts wore red face paint and were dressed in non-specific “Native” clothing. They danced around a circle (engaged in cartoonish, poorly executed “Indian” movements) to the sound of drums that could have been heard in any traditional western movie depiction of Native Americans. The scouts wore headdresses (which often considered sacred among some indigenous groups) throughout the ceremony. The “Chief” (a white Scout) told the story of the

Delaware Tribe who exemplified the “cheerful service” that was the hallmark of the OA Scout. He spoke in a stereotypical broken English fashion, filtered through white supremacist fantasies of indigenous speech patterns. After this opening, selected scouts (who were sitting around the large fire that burned in the center of the circle) were grabbed by the red face caricatures and taken away for their ordeal, an overnight process which that the scouts must endure in order to be inducted into the OA. To get a sense of what these ceremonies look like see the pictures and the video link below (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kirR5y2F0c4&feature=youtu.be>).



While the BSA has received complaints about this cultural appropriation, it has not eliminated these practices among its ranks. At present, the BSA leaves these ceremonies to the discretion of local groups who are encouraged to consult with local Native Americans to ensure some semblance of culture authenticity (something akin to finding a clueless Black dude like Jason Whitlock to defend the latest clear example of white racism against African Americans). But let’s be clear, this is not just cultural insensitivity (which is bad enough). This is literally dancing on the graves of centuries of your murder victims while wearing and holding their sacred symbols.

Below are some of the many reasons why, in my opinion, anyone who is not a white supremacist (or white supremacist collaborator) should be offended by these practices.

1. European’s arrival in the Americas led to massive loss of life among the indigenous population through disease, war, murder, land theft and other forms of destruction of life. It is estimated that 80-90% of the Native American population (between 4 and 20 million people) died as Europeans established settler colonies in the Americas.
2. The U.S. government forcefully removed approximately 100,000 indigenous people from their land in order to give that land to white people. They marched these people from the Southeast United States to areas west of the Mississippi River at gun point in order to steal their land, killing thousands along the way.
3. Indigenous families were torn apart with their children forced to attend Indian Boarding Schools under the mantra “Kill the Indian, Save the Man”  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>. There was an explicit effort to destroy the indigenous culture of those attending the schools. This is part of the larger project of what James Fenelon calls *Culturicide*.<sup>viii</sup>
4. The U.S. government has violated over 500 treaties signed with indigenous nations because with regard to native populations the words and commitments of the U.S. government mean absolutely nothing. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/01/18/368559990/broken-promises-on-display-at-native-american-treaties-exhibit>.<sup>ix</sup>

5. The U.S. government (and mostly white citizens working on their behalf) continue to violently suppress efforts by indigenous people to assert their land rights and sovereignty (e.g. Dakota Access Pipeline; <http://www.wnyc.org/story/episode-26-stay-in-your-lane/>). This pattern is consistent with the history of Europeans brutal oppression of native populations including lynching (e.g. the lynching of 38 Dakota members in Minnesota in 1862).
6. Since its inception, the film industry in the U.S. has supported white supremacy through its stereotypical depiction of Native Americans in movies. This history is well documented in scholarly texts and documentaries (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/reel-injun/>).
7. For over a century, European owned sports teams have used offensive Native American mascots. When told that these mascots are offensive (by the historic victims of their ancestors' murder, land theft, and other forms of oppression) the owners of these teams have created ridiculous rationales to cover for their belligerence.

Given this historic and contemporary relationship between Europeans and Native Americans, it is shocking that in 2017 the BSA (an overwhelmingly white organization) supports this blatant appropriation while arguing that they are honoring that culture. A bunch of 20 years olds running around in their underwear wearing faux "Indian" garb, headdresses, and red face is not a demonstration of respect for Native American culture. It's an insult. This is not how you honor a people whose land you have stolen, whose ancestors you have murdered, whose families you have divided, and whose culture you have attempted to destroy. If you truly respect Native Americans and stand for justice you need to be about repairing the harm that has been done. Until real efforts are made to end centuries of oppression, you can keep your red face minstrelsy. Justice demands you make things right, not dance around in your underwear wearing and holding your victims sacred symbols.



Update: On July 27, 2017, Michael Surbaugh wrote a statement on behalf of the BSA which included the following apology for Trump's comments.

I want to extend my sincere apologies to those in our Scouting family who were offended by the political rhetoric that was inserted into the jamboree. That was never our intent. The invitation for the sitting U.S. President to visit the National Jamboree is a long-standing tradition that has been extended to the leader of our nation that has had a Jamboree during his term since 1937. It is in no way an endorsement of any person, party or policies. For years, people have called upon us to take a position on political issues, and we have steadfastly remained non-partisan and refused to comment on political matters. We sincerely regret that politics were inserted into the Scouting program.

The full statement can be read here <http://scoutingwire.org/chief-perspective-presidential-visit/>.

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- i <https://middletownscouter.wordpress.com/2015/03/27/setting-the-record-straight-presidential-visits-to-the-bsa-national-jamboree/>.
- ii [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=18&v=obtkCHhJ\\_q8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=18&v=obtkCHhJ_q8)).
- iii <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2017/7/21/1682779/-Trump-is-the-first-president-in-30-years-to-refuse-to-attend-the-NAACP-convention-Good-riddance> .
- iv [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/25/trumps-boy-scouts-speech-broke-with-80-years-of-presidential-tradition/?utm\\_term=.4acf4664387b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/25/trumps-boy-scouts-speech-broke-with-80-years-of-presidential-tradition/?utm_term=.4acf4664387b).
- v <http://www.salon.com/2017/07/25/the-boy-scouts-are-stunned-by-donald-trumps-jaw-dropping-speech/>.
- vi <https://oa-bsa.org/pages/content/history>.
- vii <http://lastrealindians.com/boys-scouts-order-of-the-arrow-guilty-of-cultural-appropriation-by-ozheebeegay-ikwe/>.
- <http://statenews.com/article/2015/08/letter-boy-scouts-on-campus-demonstrate-insensitivity-to-native-american-traditions>.
- <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2015/8/8/1409988/-The-Boy-Scouts-of-America-Has-a-Long-Way-to-Go>.
- <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/native-news/houska-boy-scout-koshare-dancers-need-to-stop-stealing-from-natives/>.
- <http://www.freeatvt.org/my-second-name/>.
- viii Fenelon, James E. 1998. *Culturicide, Resistance and Survival of the Lakota ("Sioux Nation")* (foreword by Manley Begay) New York: Garland Publishing
- ix <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2014/11/21/1345986/-With-more-than-500-treaties-already-broken-the-government-can-do-whatever-it-wants-it-seems>.