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'Off the Reservation' – A Teachable Moment

SUZAN SHOWN HARJO • UPDATED: SEP 12, 2018 • ORIGINAL: MAY 3, 2016



"Off the reservation" is a term I've heard tossed off casually by policymakers and bureaucrats from the White House to Capitol Hill, and by reporters who cover them and editors and producers who place stories and write headlines.

When that term is used in my presence, I can tell if its user knows its history – or gets that the historical reference is hurtful or offensive to many Native Peoples today – because I'm given a full or partial apology or a sheepish or apologetic look.

At such times, I try to fill as many fact-gaps as time and occasion allow, sometimes at game-show pace.

Often, I'll get another kind of look – a defiant, so-what one – coupled with a snarky remark about an alternative historical interpretation or a "friend who's Indian and isn't bothered by it." It takes considerable experience (and self-control) to discern the genuinely confused or uninformed from those who simply are spoiling for a fight and the chance to level other offenses.

Not all those in this category are race-baiters or provocateurs out to prove that others are superior to ua, although that's the goal of many. Some are just jerks.

When a person uses "off the reservation" and is oblivious to the offense, the teaching moment can be more difficult, because making the point that the term is pejorative seems or actually may be rude or interruptive, and is as welcome as a surprise intervention.



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The speaker (and staffers and aides) usually tries to return to the original point, most often characterized as the "larger" point (read, "more important" point). The offended person then is put in the position of being a scold or arguing about whether or not there was an actual offense.

The political lesson in this teachable moment is: do not use an insulting term about one segment of society in making a point that another is being insulted.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton caused eyebrows to raise, heads to jerk, eyes to roll and political opponents to lick their chops, when she used "off the reservation" in an April 29 CNN interview: "I have a lot of experience dealing with men who sometimes get off the reservation in the way they behave and how they speak."

Making a point about unnamed men, but perhaps including Candidate Donald Trump accusing her of "playing the woman card," Clinton said, "I'm not going to deal with their temper tantrums or their bullying or their efforts to try to provoke me."

But because she sideswiped Native Peoples along the way, she undercut her intended point, upset Native supporters and opponents alike and gave her detractors a spotlight they hadn't earned.

Campaigners for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders immediately jumped on the "terrible statement."

A Sanders surrogate, Former State Senator Nina Turner (D-OH), said, "As a historian, I would caution any of us in this country to talk about anybody being off the reservation. Let us not forget that the colonists of this country stole the land from our Native American brothers and sisters, and the government put them on reservations. So, we have to be careful with that type of language as well."

Even Trump, who bellows his distaste for what he imagines is Clinton's "shouting," jumped in with all four feet. No stranger to insulting Native Peoples, only deliberately so in his case, he told a Fox News panel that the term she used is a "horrible expression" and "demeaning remark."

In a later CNN interview, Trump threw shade on the issue and nearly broke the insult meter with the "wild Indian" stereotype. "I won't even bring up the fact that the Indians have gone wild on this statement," he said. "They think it's a disastrous statement and they want a retraction."

On the same day that the Clinton interview aired on CNN, her campaign issued a statement, via Twitter. National Political Director Amanda Renteria tweeted, "About the use of an expression today that has some very offensive roots.... Divisive language has no place in our politics."

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In a separate tweet, Renteria wrote that Clinton "meant no disrespect to Native Americans. She wants this election to be about lifting people up, not tearing them down."

Director Kevin Gover (Pawnee) of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian posted this on Facebook: "Please, everybody, and especially anyone who works with politicians. Could we get them to stop using this phrase?"

After Trump's "wild" Indians remark, Gover posted: "See how easily, how casually, the discourse devolves to racist stereotype? Clinton says 'off the reservation' and Trump talks about 'wild' Indians. It's late in the day for this kind of race talk."

Fair warning, dear reader: here come some historical corrections, but not very many, so they should be relatively painless.

While the advocacy and earnestness of Sanders spokesperson Turner are greatly appreciated, she (like others, including some Native commenters) misstates the history by claiming that the 'government put them on reservations.'

Reservations are Native lands reserved by Native Nations in treaties and agreements, first with each other and later with England, France, Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Russia and other countries, and with the United States, beginning in its earliest days.

Our ancestors were not put on reservations. They reserved lands, including hunting, fishing, gathering and cultural rights in ceded territories, that they trusted the US would help protect them from the rapidly increasing and aggressive foreign populations and their diseases.

Then came the Indian Removal Act, a states' "rights" law signed by General Andrew Jackson, almost as soon as he became US President. Jackson had helped draft the Act, after he, his former aide de camp and other Indian fighters took over the Senate and House Committees on Indian Affairs. The law required a removal treaty before Native Peoples were wrenched from their homelands.

That began a process of the US backing Georgia, New York and other powerful states to ethnically cleanse certain Native reserved territories by coercing treaties for a mass movement of many Native Peoples to new reserved lands in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma and Kansas).

Whether the Native lands were negotiated in honorable nation-to-nation dealings or at bayonet point, they are our countries today. Insistence that we were forced onto reservations and need to be liberated has led to horrific policies and land loss in the distant and near past. This is one reason we take words and language so seriously, and suit up for teachable moments.

The term "off the reservation" arose in the late-1800s, when Native Peoples were confined to reservations and when the federal "Civilization Regulations" criminalized everything that made Native Peoples Native.

The "Civilization Regulations" were issued by the Interior Secretaries in 1880, 1884, 1894 and 1904 and were implemented by Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner Circulars until withdrawn in 1936. No other peoples in US society have been subjected to such systemic suppression of religions, religious freedom and cultural rights.

For more than a half-century, federal Indian Agents would decide what was a Civilization violation, which could be for such an "offense" as conducting ceremonies, dancing, playing, going to a sacred place or "roaming away from the reservation." The US Army would be called in, for example, because the Indians were "off the reservation" and given orders to get them back. Native leaders and religious practitioners were murdered and blamed for their own murders because they were "off the reservation."

It used to be that the terms "wild Indians," "hostiles," "savages," "ringleaders" and "fomenters of dissent" were not just epithets. They were charges that could and did get Native People arrested and killed. It is a miracle that any of our Native Peoples survived at all.

Use of these words and terms do more than make us bristle. The very sounds they make reverberate through time and ancestors, and make us concerned for our grandchildren.

Perhaps a President Clinton could work with the military leaders to delete from the lexicon of all soldiers and sailors "off the reservation," "Indian country" (meaning enemy territory) and other such terms that have intergenerational, family history for us.

Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne & Hodulgee Muscogee) is an award-winning ICTMN columnist. She is editor and guest curator for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indians' book and exhibition, entitled, "Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations. She is a recipient of a 2014 Presidential Medal of Honor, the United States highest civilian honor.

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