

**Seeking a Compromise - Chief Illiniwek**  
**A Report by Trustee Roger Plummer to the University of Illinois Board of Trustees**  
**March 13 - 14, 2002**

Good morning. I am pleased to present my colleagues with a report on Chief Illiniwek. Chief Illiniwek is part of a 75-year-old tradition and has remained as a special and enduring symbol for the Urbana Campus as the University and the society at large have experienced many changes.

I am here today not to extol the virtues of the Chief, which his supporters know and embrace, nor to expound on why the Chief is so offensive to so many. Indeed, that would entail covering ground that has already been adequately covered. The twelve-month period of the Dialogue Sessions conducted by the Honorable Judge Louis B. Garippo was captured in a report titled *The Chief Illiniwek Dialogue – Intent and Tradition vs. Reaction and History - A Report to the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois* (herein called the *Dialogue Report*) and contains the historical record of the Chief and all of the opinions about the tradition that anyone could possibly want to explore. I have no plan to recite them here for they are, as the saying goes, a matter of record. This report is presented assuming that the *Dialogue Report* has been read. It should have been clear to those who attended those hearings that emotions surrounding the issue of the Chief run very high and each person who spoke was not only convinced of the rightness of their position but, in some cases, dismissive of opposing views. As a result, while there was, in general, increased understanding of the many arguments advanced for keeping or retiring the Chief, the contour of a potential resolution was no clearer than when the Dialogue process began.

At the March 7, 2001 meeting of the Board, many trustees used words or phrases suggesting their desire for a compromise, though most did so in the context of wanting to keep the Chief (the same approach taken in the Dialogue discussion of compromise – see Section X of the *Dialogue Report*). As one trustee said, there was a need to “...design a route, which all interested parties will be willing to share” while others used expressions about seeking compromise or common ground. Hence, at the May 23, 2001 meeting of the Board it was decided that a “compromise” be sought if, indeed, the potential for one existed. Chairman Shea recommended that one trustee be designated to determine if that “compromise” existed. You are looking at him.

When the news of my appointment reached a friend of mine, he wrote me to suggest I was either stupid or courageous – but he wasn’t sure which. Nor am I.

Let me begin with some caveats. At the moment I was appointed, the criticism of my selection began and has continued. It was pointed out that I supported the Chief. True. Indeed, at the March 7, 2001 meeting, I stated “We must find a way to preserve this 75-year-old tradition while addressing at the same time the issues of racial sensitivity that have arisen. As trustees our charge should not be to presume to retire the Chief but to understand the perspective of all who have a stake in the tradition – our students, alumni, faculty, Illinois citizens, and others – and also consider the reasoning of those institutions that have faced these issues previously.”

I was also criticized by a faculty member for saying that the Chief was not *meant* to be offensive to Native Americans because certainly *I* should know better – the inference I drew was that because I am black I should know better. Again, I said it and stand by it. One’s “intent” may not be the determining factor in settling an issue, but it *is* important.

Further, some claimed that I was not totally objective. Again I plead guilty, but on this point we are *all* guilty, because no one who loves or opposes the tradition can be totally objective. It comes with the territory and I believed then, as I do now, that I could be as fair as anyone. Though saddled with these shortcomings, I nevertheless make this presentation to my colleagues. The items to be covered include what the search for a “compromise” yielded; the alternatives I believe are available; a review of some important elements that must be dealt with; and a brief discussion of the experience of other universities.

As my colleagues know, I have endeavored to keep them up to speed individually during this process because ultimately the accountability for resolving this matter is a shared one. This decision is not mine alone to make.

No specific process was mandated to implement this effort to seek a "compromise" so a very simple one was designed. What had been clear owing to the Dialogue process is that the opinions of pro- and anti-Chief groups and individuals were well known. By the way the terms pro-Chief and anti-Chief are used throughout this report as shorthand for those who favor the Chief's retention or desire his retirement. I decided not to rehash those opinions but to provide, instead, an opportunity for those with thoughtful points-of-view to be heard and to express their opinions on how a "compromise" resolution might be fashioned.

The process that was used involved speaking to pro-Chief and anti-Chief groups and individuals - students, faculty, alumni, interested Illinois citizens, university administration, Native Americans and, of course, University of Illinois Trustees. It was through this process that I hoped some new insights would emerge. Each person, if they desired, was given anonymity for the comments they made.

In each instance the group or individual being interviewed was given an opportunity to establish what would be an acceptable resolution and, more importantly, what would be the rationale for that resolution. During the interviews care was exercised to listen and not interject my personal opinions – at any rate, they were not even fully formed.

While every effort was made to keep the focus on the matter of finding an acceptable “compromise,” almost everyone interviewed could not resist stating why the position they espoused to retire or retain the Chief was absolutely the right thing to do. This was an unavoidable aspect of the overall process and hardly surprising.

After nine months of reviewing options presented for a “compromise” resolution, including many unsolicited recommendations, it is abundantly clear that there *is no “compromise”* available. “Compromise” for the purpose of this effort is defined as *a resolution that is broadly supportable by a sizable majority of those expressing a view on the Chief, with adequate support from representative numbers of each of the various “camps.”* As I evaluated the outcome of the interviews against this definition it became clear why a “compromise” is beyond reach. The positions staked out on all sides of the Chief issue – by the way there are more than two sides – make the development of a solution acceptable to dedicated and determined pro- and anti-Chief individuals or groups virtually impossible. In fact those on the “far ends” of the Chief issue, if that expression may be used, sought to stake out even stronger positions in our conversations. For example, some Chief supporters suggested having the Chief appear more frequently, become more prominent and be more involved in campus life, while some wanting the Chief's retirement desired that the retirement not leave a trace of the Chief Illiniwek tradition including the elimination of the use of the names Illini and Fighting Illini.

The polar opposites could never be reconciled and the Dialogue sessions, where the issue of compromise was specifically addressed, as well as this interview process, have made that fact crystal clear. Therefore, the process became focused on the individuals and groups in the “middle” whose viewpoints were much less hardened and predictable. The folks in the middle were inclined to seek a resolution that did not represent the status quo or complete elimination of the Chief.

Though there were many creative thoughts expressed during this process, there was no epiphany or “aha!” experience. There was no special revelation that months of Dialogue had not already unearthed. There were, however, some important observations that arose which account, in part, for what will be presented later.

While there is still very strong, vocal and unyielding support for the Chief among alumni and many friends of the University of Illinois, a few observations are noteworthy:

- There is a growing concern in some quarters about the increasing marginalization of the Chief and whether, as a result, the Chief Tradition is dying a slow inevitable death not befitting such an honorable tradition;
- Some are troubled by the damage being done to the prestige and luster of the University, as well as the turmoil in the University family, stating they love the University more than they love any one symbol – including the Chief;
- Also, some acknowledge experiencing increased difficulty in reconciling their support for the Chief and their growing desire to respond to what they feel are the legitimate claims of members of the Native American community about the how they are negatively affected by the Chief;
- Further, some worry that the fate of the Chief will ultimately fall into the hands of governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, like the NCAA, and meet an ignoble end that is out of the University's control; and
- Finally, others are concerned that dealing with Chief Illiniwek is an undesirable distraction for the Board and university administration and leaves insufficient time to focus on and deal with more important matters.

These views tend not to be expressed publicly because of concern by those who express them of being viewed as bowing to pressure or political correctness.

On the other hand, while anti-Chief sentiment was also found to be just as strong as voiced in the Dialogue sessions, it should be noted:

- There were expressions by some that their desire for the retirement of the Chief was not the same as denouncing its history and labeling it as a racist mascot, as many have done;
- Some do distinguish among the Chief, the dance, the graphic image and the name Illini and do not view them all the same;
- Further, some anti-Chief persons have a level of empathy for those with pro-Chief positions and in some cases expressed a desire to take the heat by coming out for an *honorable* retirement – though this position does not appear to be supported by the majority in the anti-Chief camp; and
- Finally, some do admit to ambivalence and express concern about the appropriateness of the tactics that are employed to bring about the end of the Chief.

Some persons expressing these sentiments were likewise cautious about saying them in public.

As different as these two sets of observations are from the recurrent themes that emerged in the public Dialogue sessions, they do not form the basis for a “compromise.” Though they are different from the views of the majority of those in the pro-Chief and anti-Chief camps they are not at all close to one another. Once it became clear that no “compromise” was likely, the Chairman of the Board asked that alternatives be developed based on what was heard during the process of attempting to find a “compromise.”

Let me say to my colleagues I have worked to develop alternatives without staking out my personal position or making a recommendation. I have been mindful at every step of this process that I am not deciding the University's course but enlightening my colleagues on the Board about plausible options.

On more than one occasion, interviewees have expressed the opinion that the University can achieve much more than resolving the issue of the Chief Tradition. Some feel that if the Board of Trustees acts in a way that unifies the University of Illinois family during this process, it can establish a new beginning. That is, the University can use the occasion to make a statement about its overarching values; the importance of traditions; the role of the Board in such matters; its commitment to true dialogue among its many constituents, etc. Time will tell.

A number of principles were employed in deciding alternatives for the trustees to consider. These principles are a compilation of what was heard from the many persons interviewed in this process and what I have come to believe are critical matters to be addressed as the Board decides what course of action to take.

These principles are appropriate whether the Chief is retained or retired.

An alternative must, to the extent possible:

- Be in the very best interest of the University and not of any particular constituency or interest group
- Be consistent with the values espoused and practiced by the University
- Encompass the views expressed by a large majority of the members of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees and, if a unanimous outcome is not achieved, be *acceptable* to the remaining members
- Bring finality to the subject with no ambiguity on where the Board stands or what is required of university administration
- Have a compelling rationale found acceptable by a large majority of the University's constituencies
- Not demean nor devalue the 75-year-old tradition of the Chief
- Recognize, *if* the Chief is to be retired, that there must be a transitional period and, perhaps, a celebration
- Contain elements to begin the healing process among the constituencies that love and support the University of Illinois
- Produce no "winners" at the expense of those individuals or groups whose opinions do not prevail in whole or in part

It may seem to be stating the obvious but, after conducting this process, I have concluded that the Board of Trustees has but two alternatives – retain the Chief or retire him. While the statement is simple, getting to either of these two states is not simple. I have described it as getting to one state or the other because an effort to retain the Chief must deal with the fact that the current state of the Chief is an unstable one and that the turmoil created by the Chief issue will not abate without significant change, if the Chief is to be retained. The two alternatives presented are with the recognition that there are several elements that comprise the tradition of the Chief. Key among them are Chief Illiniwek himself, the Chief's dance, the Chief graphic image, Fighting Illini and Illini. All of these elements are so closely identified with the Chief that it is impossible to address the matter of the Chief without a specific statement about them.

The two alternatives presented for the Board's consideration are (not to be assumed as an ordinal list):

**Retain the Chief**, arrest and reverse the slow marginalization that has occurred over the last several years. Strengthen the support for the Chief by making changes that make him less offensive and build other programmatic elements around him to re-invigorate the tradition. Retain the dance, Fighting Illini, Illini, the graphic image and Three-in-One. Acknowledge in a meaningful way the importance of Native Americans to the State of Illinois.

**Retire the Chief**, including the dance, by a date certain, with a transition plan. Discontinue use of the Chief graphic. Retain Fighting Illini and Illini, and, should the campus choose, keep the Three-in-One as a part of half-time celebrations. The retirement should be an honorable one that does not demean, devalue nor apologize for this 75-year-old tradition. Specifically, the history and importance of the Chief to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign should be memorialized in perpetuity and there should be separate recognition of the important place of Native Americans in the history of the State of Illinois.

These are presented as alternatives but clearly there are variations on them that one might want to suggest. At the request of the Board Chairman, I make no recommendation so that rather than have each trustee spend time arguing *for or against* a recommendation that I might advance each should, instead, spend their time *arguing for and providing supporting rationale for* the alternative with which they most agree. Also, no trustee is precluded from proposing a variant on these alternatives or an alternative that is not here. In each of these scenarios the University President and Chancellor would be expected to develop a plan to implement the statement of policy and include whatever parties that it is felt would be of most help in doing

so, but should be sure to involve the Alumni Association and Foundation leadership in that planning. The plan would be presented to the Board upon its completion.

Until now I have presented information absent much in the way of personal opinion, but I would like to address an element that gets discussed at times, and that is the notion that Illini and Fighting Illini are necessarily tied to the fate of the Chief. I don't agree. I acknowledge that the people of the Illinois or Illiniweh confederation have sometimes been referred to as Illini, especially since 1900, but I want to focus on the use of the term Illini at the University of Illinois.

The term Illini appears first to have been applied to the student newspaper in 1874, then to students and alumni of the University, then to its athletic teams.

The origin of Illini was as a variant of Illinois. Those who used it were aware that Illinois as the name of an Indian people, and they drew on that association when they referred to Illinois or to Illini, but they clearly meant to echo the name of the state.

The student paper, a monthly, changed its name from *The Student* to *The Illini* when it also changed its format in January 1874. An editorial in that first issue declared that:

“. . . we are all aglow over our new name. Had you noticed it? Did you ever see it before? Do you know what it means and where it comes from? Sound it 'trippingly on the tongue.' Accent the second syllable and pronounce it with us, Il-li-ni. Good! Try, try again until it fits the tongue as well as *Illinois*, simply a Frenchman's modification of the same word. Here ambition steals away our modesty and with a thrill of excitement we hopefully query: Shall our name be known in future time as far and wide as that of the broad fair state we honor, and shall it be cherished and loved like that? Shall generation after generation pass and find unfailing stores of richness and worth? . . . Illinois! Queen of the Union, we place up on thy fair brow the diadem of the States; ILLINI!-ah! What will others say? We wait and wonder and away to work . . .”

On December 9, 1882, eight years later, *The Illini*, then a semi-monthly, said that “We have frequently been asked the question, ‘Whence did your paper take its name, and what is the pronunciation of the word?’ ” and answered the question this way “the organ of the State University may with propriety bear a name similar to that of its patron and supporter. Illini is but another form of the Indian word Illinois, and has the same meaning, *i.e.* ‘real men.’ Perhaps it is a French abbreviation of the term. The originators of the paper might have searched the world over and would have found no better name than that of our great state.”

Slowly the name spread to the students and alumni and only then to the athletic teams. In all cases, it was meant to evoke the name of the state as well as the state’s Native American origins.

It is clear that use of the term Illini by the University predates Chief Illiniwek by 50 years, and while the origins are common, the University would seem to be well served to argue that Illini is a part of the Urbana campus’ continuing heritage irrespective of the future of the Chief.

The adjective “fighting” is an entirely different kind of issue. We seem to apply it to athletic teams in the same way as it is used by all those political candidates who are promising to ‘fight’ for us in Springfield and Washington, D.C. The names Fighting Irish, Fighting Scots, Fighting Knights, Fighting Saints, Fighting Gamecocks, Fighting Owls and Fighting Squirrels, among others, are meant to suggest college teams that strive valiantly for victory, not ones that seek literal combat.

My colleagues will have to judge for themselves, but it seems to me that it is possible to strongly support Fighting Illini while deliberating separately on the issue of Chief Illiniwek.

At the outset I mentioned my remarks from March 2001 and the need to consult various sources - including other universities that have had to deal with a similar issue. This aspect of exploration was part of the Dialogue process but bears a repeated mention in this report to bring it into focus (details in section VI of the *Dialogue Report*).

The University of Illinois is not the only university to have had to grapple with the issue of a Native American name, symbol and/or mascot. Examples of well-known institutions that have eliminated their

“mascots/symbols” are Dartmouth and Stanford, which changed their “Indian” symbols many years ago or Miami of Ohio, which abandoned “Redskins” in the late ‘90’s.

What is clear is that *no two institutions* are the same in the nature of the elements that have been involved and, thus, how this issue has been dealt with.

In some cases the use of the tribal symbol/mascot has at one time or another enjoyed the imprimatur of the descendant tribe – e.g. Peoria Tribe at the University of Illinois; Miami Tribe of Oklahoma at Miami University of Ohio; Seminole Tribe at Florida State University; and some but not all Sioux Tribes at the University of North Dakota. The length of the tradition varies as well.

Further, in not all of these instances has the tribal name or symbol been used in the same way – some have had a personification of the tribe (Chief Miami, Chief Illiniwek, Chief Osceola) while others merely have had Native American icons, logos or symbols. While Miami University of Ohio has resolved its issue by adopting RedHawks, the University of North Dakota is currently in the midst of a debate about its tradition much as is the University of Illinois. Florida State is on the record as not changing its symbol unless the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma decide that they no longer approve. Because the basis for dealing with the use of Native American symbols and culture can vary considerably, there is no ready prescription to be adopted by the University of Illinois from these other university settings. At best it can seek to determine *how* these institutions finally “resolved” the matter.

Miami of Ohio parallels the University of Illinois in one important way in that each university, at one time, had the imprimatur and official endorsement of the tribe in question only to have that endorsement officially revoked. In our case, the Peoria have formally asked us to retire the Chief. To the extent that a university valued an initial endorsement it is hard pressed to ignore completely the fact that the endorsement has been rescinded as it develops a plan.

The experience of other major institutions – those that rank in prestige with the University of Illinois – that have dealt with this issue shows that ultimately the voice of the Native American community must be heard, listened to and responded to. Once it is has become evident that objections are coming from thoughtful advocates from the Native American community, the University's ultimate response needs to acknowledge them – whichever alternative is chosen. Although, as an article in the March 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Sports Illustrated* makes clear, the Native American community is not of one mind on all of these issues.

Finally, several of my colleagues went on record a year ago saying that this issue was one of principle not to be decided on the basis of financial support gained or lost. Still we all take our fiduciary responsibility very seriously, so it is heartening that Stanford, Dartmouth and Miami of Ohio did not suffer as a result of their decisions, though by itself this observation makes no argument for either alternative.

The University of Illinois and its Board of Trustees are at a crossroads and leadership is required. The decision to retain or retire the Chief is not a trivial one, and, indeed, may stigmatize those who support either outcome. Nonetheless, the current board has been handed this challenge and cannot duck it. The Board has had to deal with this matter before, in October 1990, and by a vote of 7-1, with one trustee not voting and the two student trustees casting advisory “no” votes, the statewide trustees affirmed support for Chief Illiniwek. That statement of policy and intent has stood ever since.

As I mentioned at the outset, there are no easy or right answers. I am certain each of my fellow trustees has had ample time over the past 24 months to think about all of the issues, and I hope this input helps and puts the finishing touches on their thought process.

I have tried to be even-handed in this process. At times it was difficult to stay focused when the decibel level of discourse continued to rise. Reaching a resolution is not easy in an environment more characterized by heat than light.

I ask that my colleagues not be intimidated by strong and vocal expressions of opinion from any quarter and do what is best for this university that we love. There will be a strong reaction no matter what we eventually decide.

Finally, Chairman Shea asked that in addition to not making a recommendation, I not share my personal view until there is a general discussion at the Board table, whenever that occurs.

Thank you for your attention and I will answer any questions you may have.

March 13, 2002