

Debunking Stereotypes of Native American Military Service

GRADES 9-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 9-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 60 minutes.

Native Americans have been involved in every U.S. military campaign since the Revolutionary War. However, the relationship between European settlers and native communities has led to deeply entrenched stereotypes that characterize native people as innate warriors, born to go to war.

In this lesson, participants will use artwork and oral histories to explore the definition of the word *stereotype* and how stereotypes are applied to Native Americans serving in the U.S. military.



Objective

Participants will be able to identify the social, economic, and political factors that have driven Native Americans to join the service.



Materials

- Chart paper
- “Joseph “Jocko” Clark” Comic
- “Freedom’s Warrior - American Indian”
- Oral history clips of Keith Little, Jesse Running Deer Smith, Virgil George England and Steven L. Bobb



Inquiry

Ask participants:

- What are some movies and TV shows in which you've seen Native Americans represented?
- How are Native Americans usually portrayed in movies and on TV shows?
- What is a *stereotype*?

Share the “Joseph “Jocko” Clark” comic with participants. The comic was part of Jocko’s personal collection. Its creator and exact creation year are unknown, but his materials were donated posthumously by his wife. Discuss the following questions:

- What people do you see in the cartoon? Who are they portraying? What are they doing?
- What stereotypes are represented in the cartoon? How are these stereotypes harmful?
- What is the effect of the caption in the cartoon? The signs?
- What does this cartoon tell us about how the Navy viewed Native American service members at the time? What about service members from Japan and the Pacific Islands?



Investigation

Participants will listen to or read transcripts of **four** oral history clips and identify a reason in each one that the speaker gives for joining the U.S. military.

- The [oral history clip](#) of **Steven L. Bobb**, a member of the Umpqua tribe, which is one of five tribes in the larger Grand Ronde Community. He served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1971.
- The [oral history clips](#) of **Virgil George England** and **Keith Little**. England was a member of the Cherokee Nation, and attended Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma before joining the military. He served during the Cold War from 1955 to 1958.
- The [oral history clip](#) of **Jesse Running Deer Smith**. Jesse Running Deer Smith was born in West Virginia and was a member of the Cherokee Nation. He lived with his parents in his childhood, but his father died when he was 16. He served in the Navy from 1956 to 1958, and later in the Air Force from 1958 to 1975.
- The second [oral history clip](#) from **Keith Little**. Little was a member of the Navajo Nation and served as a Navajo Code Talker during World War II after attending a mission school in Arizona.



Activity

Share “Freedom’s Warrior - American Indian” by Charles Wilson. Discuss the following questions:

- What is the effect of the people in the background on your understanding of the person in the foreground?
- What does this artwork tell the viewer about Native American service members?

Compare “Freedom’s Warrior - American Indian” to the comic featuring “Jocko” Clark.

- How do the themes of the two pieces compare to each other?
- How does the depiction of traditional native dress vary between the two pieces?



Lesson Connection

For more first-person accounts describing why crew members chose to join the Navy, see our lesson, **Hearing from Crew Members: Why Join the Navy?**



Background

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are a type of story that we tell about individuals based on our beliefs about a group to which they belong. They are generalized beliefs and can be about the group’s personality, appearance, abilities, or any other aspects of their identity. Stereotypes are often inaccurate and overgeneralized and can be the basis for prejudice against a group.

“Jocko” Clark

Joseph “Jocko” Clark was a member of the Cherokee Nation and an admiral in the U.S. Navy. He was the first Native American to graduate from the United States Naval Academy and later commanded aircraft carriers during World War II. Throughout his career, Jocko earned a Navy

Cross, Navy Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Legion of Merit with Combat "V" and Navy Commendation Medal, among many other awards. Explain to participants that the comic depicts Jocko Clark during World War II. Jocko was known for his aggression and willingness to take his sailors into battle.

Stereotype of Native Americans in the Military

Native Americans have a long history of being characterized as warriors: violent, vicious and ruthless. This idea originates from the centuries of battles fought between European settlers and the Native people whose land the Europeans were encroaching on in the United States. Many Native American Army veterans report being given scouting duties because of the widespread idea that all Native Americans have natural tracking abilities.

The image of Native Americans as ruthless warriors is a *stereotype*, and many people use that stereotype to explain Native Americans' presence in the U.S. Military. However, Native Americans' notion of warriorhood and reasons for joining the military are very different from the usual generalization.

Another stereotype that feeds Native Americans' reputation in the military is related to the number of Native people who maintain their ancestral ways of life. Many Americans are unfamiliar with Native traditions, and there exists a common perception that this way of life is unsophisticated. Many Native Americans today straddle a line between tradition and assimilation, maintaining their ancestral practices while still being a part of American society.

It is true that Native Americans have high rates of service. Up to 10 percent of the entire Native American population served in World War II. In the Vietnam War, a quarter of eligible Native Americans served, compared to one in twelve non-Native people. Many of them volunteered. Today, although the United States is 1.4% Native Americans, the military is approximately 1.7% Native.

Debunking the Stereotype

The stereotype developed about Native Americans serving in the military is based on the idea of intense warfare waged by tribal warriors against European settlers trying to make a home in the United States. European settlers arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, and conflict with Native Americans began almost immediately.

The Native people were willing to trade with the settlers, but when the settlers began seizing their land, they attacked. The American Indian wars were waged from the early 1600s to the late 19th century. Many of these battles were extremely violent, resulting in hundreds of lives lost on all sides. Native Americans were frequently left out of peace talks and lost land whether they won the battle or not.

By the late 1800s, tens of thousands of Native and non-Native lives had been lost to war. Europeans grew to view Native Americans primarily as a threat. Conflict between the groups developed into the war-hungry stereotype that exists about Native Americans today. This has

been exacerbated by a century of television and film portraying noble white men saving American towns from ruthless Native Americans.

In reality, the majority of Native communities attempt to balance war and peace. For example, many Plains Indian communities in the 1800s practiced *honorable warfare*, a nonlethal way of engaging with traditional enemies and testing abilities. Honorable warfare involved invading or touching an enemy without killing them. It was waged for revenge, to gain spiritual power, or in some cases for economic gain, by ways such as stealing horses. Successful warriors were honored with eagle feathers and status, but no honor was awarded for killing or scalping.

In contrast to the Anglo-American notion of warfare as a means of territorial conquest, political subjugation, and economic success, Plains warfare was waged for honor and the maintenance of tribal identity. Native Americans may have still seen service in the U.S. military as a way to gain honor, but not as a means to fight and kill, as the stereotype propagated throughout the 20th century.

Steven L. Bobb Oral History Clip

Native Americans have the highest per capita enlistment among racial groups in the United States. This is due to a number of factors; not least among them is a continued cultural emphasis on the honorable warrior. Although traditional Native American warfare may have been very different from the conflict carried out by the United States military, serving in the military has become a proxy for carrying out the traditional practice of honorable warfare.

One veteran, Joseph Medicine Crow, describes achieving all of the requirements needed to become a Plains tribal war chief while serving in World War II. He invaded an enemy town, touched an enemy and disarmed them without killing them, and stole an enemy's horses. When he returned, he was declared a war chief.

Many Native Americans live in an ambiguous state of allegiance to two nations, their tribal community and the United States. They have had to reinvent their cultural practices over and over to adapt to their status on the fringes of the United States. Thus, serving in the U.S. military is a way of showing patriotism to the U.S., but it also allows individuals to maintain their cultural identity by carrying out a centuries-old practice.

Steven Bobb references the treaties held by few Native American tribes with the United States government that were supposed to restrict the selective service from calling members of that tribe. However, the United States did not generally honor the treaties they held with these tribes and drafted their members anyway. Many Native Americans volunteered for World War II and the Vietnam War to avoid being drafted, and therefore avoid being subject to a broken treaty.

Virgil George England & Keith Little Oral History Clips

Patriotism was a large driving force for Native Americans joining the military in the 20th century. 44,000 native men joined the U.S. Military after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many citing protecting the United States, meaning their ancestral homelands, from enemy invaders.

Jesse Running Deer Smith Oral History Clip

The military was also a way to escape the poverty experienced by many Native Americans living on reservations. It provided steady employment, a salary, room and board, and other necessities. Many Native American women joined the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and other military auxiliary corps during World War II as a way of moving out of poverty.

Keith Little Oral History Clip

In the early 20th century, another influence on Native people was the acculturative and assimilationist force from the U.S. government attempting to get them all to blend into the white majority. Federally-funded, off-reservation boarding schools were formed as places to force Native American children and teens to adapt to the Anglo American way of life. During World War I, many Native teens were able to leave their boarding schools by enlisting in the military.

Freedom's Warrior - American Indian

This artwork was created by Charles Banks Wilson for the Office of War Information in 1943. Part of the Office's job was to draw a connection between those at the battlefield and civilian communities. The man in the front was a code-talker, a name given to a group of Native Americans during World War II who used their traditional languages to communicate secretly. Behind the code-talker are six important Native American figures, including Chief Joseph, Sitting Bull, Tecumseh, Geronimo, Black Hawk and Pontiac. These leaders came from varied backgrounds, but represent Native American strength and history.



Additional Resources/References

National Museum of the American Indian, Why We Serve: Native Americans in the United States Armed Forces <https://americanindian.si.edu/static/why-we-serve/>

Smithsonian, The Remarkable and Complex Legacy of Native American Military Service <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/remarkable-and-complex-legacy-native-american-military-service-180976264/>



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Documents and Images

Joseph "Jocko" Clark Cartoon



Credit: Collection of the Intrepid Museum. Gift of Olga Clark in memory of Admiral Joseph James Clark.
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Freedom's Warrior - American Indian



Credit: Library of Congress, [LC-USZ62-87996]