

A Good Day for North Dakota

by Martin "Red" Fredricks

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"A sad day for North Dakota," Kris Engelstad McGarry called it. With all due respect to McGarry, many North Dakotans view it as a day of redemption when some sense was restored to a state that thrives on common sense.

McGarry, daughter of the late Ralph Engelstad, referred to the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education's May 14 decision to accelerate the deadline for tribal approval of the University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux nickname. If the two North Dakota Sioux tribes do not approve 30-year agreements to support continued use of the name by October, UND must begin transitioning to a new moniker and symbol.

It is a belated redemption because the current board has taken a positive step to correct the action of the board of December 2000. That board inserted itself into the nickname/logo debate the day after Engelstad sent the now infamous "Dear Chuck" letter to then-UND president Charles Kupchella. In the Dec. 20, 2000 letter, Engelstad wrote that he would halt work on the half-completed Ralph Engelstad Arena, what was destined to become the home of the UND hockey team, if the Sioux name and logo were not retained. At the time, he had invested \$35 million into the \$85 million project. He sent copies of the letter to members of the Board of Higher Education, which was set to meet the next day.

"Please do not consider this letter a threat in any manner, as it is not intended to be," Engelstad wrote.

We North Dakotans tend to call things the way we see them, and that was what we call a threat. It was a strong one, at that, a gun held to the head of Kupchella, UND and North Dakota as a whole. When the board voted unanimously to retain the Sioux name and logo, it gave him the ammunition.

That was the real sad day for North Dakota, regardless of how you feel about the name issue. And there really is no need to add anything to that discussion.

Fervent voices have adequately presented the arguments on both sides. I can appreciate the strong feelings of those who love the Sioux name and logo. As a North Dakota State University alumnus, I would have the same deep feelings if someone said "Bison" had to go away. I can also understand those who question the use of a name and logo that members of the culture they represent find demeaning or offensive.

What many North Dakotans didn't like was the intimidation, and our loss of self-respect was even worse. Do as I say, Engelstad clearly told us, or you won't get your hockey arena. This, to people who have fended for ourselves for generations. Who was Engelstad to tell us what we could or could not do? Surely, if UND needed a new arena that badly, funds could be raised in other ways from other people.

Unfortunately, the board apparently saw it another way and, with its 8-0 vote, sent a return letter to Engelstad with our pride enclosed.

By all accounts, the Engelstad Arena is a marvel, a monument to UND, its hockey team and Engelstad himself. But it cost us much more than the money it took to build.

In her comments, McGarry said she was not surprised by the "lack of conviction" of the state board and UND President Robert Kelly in fighting for the Sioux name and logo. On the contrary, their actions demonstrated a return to conviction, a restoration of the pride that will not allow North Dakota to be bullied, regardless of how much money is at stake.

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