

## Many Indians irked but not surprised by code name

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN, Associated Press Susan Montoya Bryan, Associated Press Wed May 4, 7:22 pm ET

Geronimo was known as a legendary Apache warrior whose ability to walk without leaving footprints allowed him to evade thousands of Mexican and U.S. soldiers, much like Osama bin Laden evaded capture for the past decade.

But for Native Americans, there's an important difference: Geronimo was a hero — not a terrorist.

So to them, the U.S. military's use of the revered leader's moniker as a code name for bin Laden was appalling — a slap in the face that prompted statements of disapproval from tribal leaders, a flurry of angry comments on social network sites and a letter from the leader of Geronimo's tribe asking President Barack Obama to apologize.

Many Native Americans also say that while they are angered, they are not surprised. They say the code name is yet another insult in a long, tumultuous history with the federal government.

"We've been oppressed for so long, it just doesn't matter anymore," said Leon Curley, a Navajo and Marine veteran from Gallup, N.M. "The government does what it wants when it wants. The name calling is going to stay around forever. But when you think about it, this is an insult."

Even Jeff Houser, chairman of Geronimo's Fort Sill Apache Tribe, noted in his letter to Obama that the decision behind the code name was based not in malice, but an ongoing cultural disconnect.

"We are quite certain that the use of the name Geronimo as a code for Osama bin Laden was based on misunderstood and misconceived historical perspectives of Geronimo and his armed struggle against the United States and Mexican governments," Houser wrote.

"However, to equate Geronimo or any other Native American figure with Osama bin Laden, a mass murderer and cowardly terrorist, is painful and offensive to our Tribe and to all Native Americans."

The White House referred questions on the matter to the U.S. Defense Department, which said no disrespect was meant to Native Americans.

The department wouldn't elaborate on the use of Geronimo's name but said code names typically are chosen randomly and allow those working on a mission to communicate without divulging information to adversaries.

The U.S. military has a long tradition of naming weapons and helicopters after American Indian tribes, chiefs and artifacts, a policy that became official with a 1969 Army regulation. The rule was later rescinded, but a 2009 Army Times article said the tradition continues today "as a way to honor America's war fighter heritage."

The military also has a history with the word "Geronimo" — American paratroopers in World War II started using it as a war cry in the early 1940s. It's possible they picked up the term from the Paramount Pictures movie "Geronimo!" — about a West Point grad and his Army regiment's attempt to capture the warrior — which was released around the same time.

The reason behind the name's use in the bin Laden raid has been the subject of much speculation. Some think it's because the al-Qaida leader, like Geronimo, was able to elude capture for so many years. Others say it's because the government considered both men terrorists, and some have suggested the guerrilla-style raid on bin Laden's compound was reflective of the Apache's fighting techniques.

Louis Maynahonah, a Navy veteran and chairman of the Apache Tribe of Oklahoma, said he doesn't believe the code name was meant to be derogatory. He pointed to the name's use as a paratrooper war cry and to the fleets of military aircraft named after Indian tribes, including the Apache helicopter.

"It's symbolic to me of the Army at the time trying to capture Geronimo," he said of the code name. "They had a heck of time because he used to slip back across the Mexican border. This bin Laden has been slipping from us for 10 years."

Whatever the reason behind it, many in Indian Country say the code name was simply a bad choice that reopened old wounds.

"The name Geronimo is arguably the most recognized Native American name in the world, and this comparison only serves to perpetuate negative stereotypes about our peoples," the Onondaga Nation Council of Chiefs said in a statement issued Tuesday.

"The U.S. military leadership should have known better," the chiefs said.

Morning Star Gali, a member of the Pit River Tribe in California, agreed. Part of Gali's family is descended from Geronimo's tribe, and she has made it a point to share that history with her three young children.

"We definitely try to instill who our heroes were and who Geronimo was and what he represented to our people and the sacrifices and struggles that they made for us to be here today," said Gali, a community liaison coordinator with the International Indian Treaty Council.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly said he would like to see the Obama administration and the Pentagon change the code name "so that U.S. history books will not continue to portray negative stereotypes of Native Americans and that America's youth will remember Geronimo as one of our greatest war heroes."

Geronimo is a legend among Apaches and other tribes for the fierce fighting he brought on during the 19th century as he tried to protect his land, his people and their way of life from encroachment by U.S. and Mexican armies.

Stories have been passed down about the Apache leader's ability to walk without leaving footprints, which helped him evade the thousands of soldiers and scouts who spent years looking for him throughout the Southwest.

After the families of Geronimo and other warriors were captured and sent to Florida, he and 35 warriors surrendered to Gen. Nelson A. Miles near the Arizona-New Mexico border in 1886. Geronimo eventually was sent to Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where he died of pneumonia in 1909.

Some Indian leaders say the attention should not be placed on bin Laden but rather on the men and women — including the many Native Americans — who are serving in the armed forces in the Middle East.

The Onondaga Nation chiefs and the Navajos described the military record of Native Americans as exemplary. They pointed to the sheer number of American Indian soldiers as well as the code talkers who used their Native languages to develop an unbreakable code during World War II.

Jefferson Keel, an Army veteran and president of the National Congress of American Indians, said that since 2001, 61 American Indians and Alaskan Natives have died fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq and more than 400 have been wounded.

"Let's be very clear about what is important here," Keel said in a statement. "The successful removal of Osama bin Laden as a threat to the United States honors the sacrifice these Native warriors made for the United States and their people."

He added it was his understanding that bin Laden's code name was "Jackpot," while the operation was called Geronimo. Regardless, associating a Native warrior with bin Laden "undermines the military service of Native people," he said.

The U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee is expected to discuss the code name issue at its oversight hearing Thursday on the impact of racial stereotypes.

Gali hopes the panel presses for remedies, including an apology from the government. "There are a number of steps that can be taken," she said. "Racism is very ingrained, and there's a long way to go to be able to make it right."

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Associated Press researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York contributed to this report.

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