

# Good example of windtalkers critical thinking

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



## Final Project Part II

Cultural Awareness

CRIM 103

The film "Windtalkers" directed by John Woo came out on big screens in 2002. The movie was named after brave marines of Navajo origin that served as code talkers during the war. Navajo language is so difficult and so rare that the American army chose it as a coding language for their operations. It played a crucial role in the US army's success in Japan.

The movie starts with a departure scene, in which future Navajo soldiers say goodbyes to their friends and families. In this scene we meet the protagonists Ben Yahzee and Charlie Whitehorse, friends that decided to join the army to help their motherland. Further, they are sent to a training camp to learn the coding language. The particularity of this specific code was that it didn't make sense to Navajos that didn't learn the code, even though they were native speakers. It is important to point out that on the background in the reservation we see several flags of the United States of America. The director probably wanted to show the unity of two nations and that Navajos are Americans the same way white citizens of the United States are. At the same time, unfortunately, it supports stereotypes and clichés we usually meet in the movies about Native Americans. Instead of representing the unity of the nations, the flag is read as a dominance of the United States over Navajo people. The overall overbearing patriotism shown in the film leaves the feeling of dominance of a big brother over a little brother. Instead of focusing on Native American culture, it is focused on the US too much. At the beginning of the film we also meet a white Sergeant Joe Enders, a

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central protagonist of the movie. His story starts in the battle, where he has to lead his fellow soldiers. The situation they found themselves in was hopeless and everyone wanted to leave the battlefield to stay alive, but Enders follows the order and makes them stay which results in death of everyone except him, which is the source of his future suffering and frustrations. In the end of the scene he gets hit by grenade and damages his ear resulting in him being deaf on one ear and losing the sense of balance. Next, he is shown in the hospital desperately wanting to get back to war to pay dues to his dead companions. The nurse that has romantic feelings for Enders helps him cheat the ear test and get back to the battlefield. Joe's life doesn't become easier when he gets his assignment, according to which he has to pair up with one of the code talkers (Ben) and protect him from getting captured by the Japanese. To be more precise, his duty is not to protect the code talker but to protect the code which implies killing his Navajo companion in case there is a risk of the code talker getting caught by the enemy. Here comes a dilemma whether he should distance himself from Ben or get close to him, he chose the last. The first problem with Nicolas Cage's protagonist is that he, the white guy, is the main character in the movie that is supposed to be about a minority. This is a mistake many directors that shoot movies about minorities are guilty of. Instead of telling the story from Navajo's perspective, describing the duality of the situation they find themselves in: fighting for oppressors that colonized them and put to reservations, the movie is centered on a white man's struggle with his conscience. The topic of reservations and stratification of Navajo people were not touched at all in the movie about them. Only a couple of examples

of American oppression were voiced by a Navajo characters in a couple of lines during a 2 hour film. One may say that due to the fact that director is not a Navajo, he is afraid of showing the story through their eyes as it can be incorrect, but in my opinion, there are many witnesses and experts that could be involved into the movie helping with authenticity. The second problem is in the fact that the assignment to save the code by killing a code talker is not based on any historical date and is a pure invention of a playwright. In reality, very few code talkers had " protectors". In my opinion, this move of the playwright and director enforces the image of White-American dominance over Native Americans, the life of which in the movie dependent on the will of their " baby-sitters".

The first encounter of code talkers with marines happens when they finish their training are sent to Marine's camp. When Yahzee and Whitehorse first come there, Charlie says " I've never seen so many white men" to which Ben replied " They never seen so many Navajo", meaning the segregation of Native Americans in the United States, when they had to live in reservations in their own country. As in most movies about minorities, there is one " bad guy", a racist, that openly shows his attitude harassing a non-white American. In the case of Windtalkers such character is represented by Private Charles " Chick" Clusters who from the very beginning despises both code talkers. He doesn't accept Ben and Charlie into his card game, calls them Injuns. He doesn't limit himself to passive-aggressive remarks and openly harasses the guys. In one of the scenes Ben swims in the river and when he gets out of the water, Chick confronted him mocking him and saying that he doesn't see any difference between the Navajo and the

Japanese, calling him a " slanty-eyed savage", which refers to a common stereotype that all Native Americans are brutal and " scalp people". He beat him up and spat him in the face. Yahzee responded to his aggression, threw Chick on the ground and punched him several times. The fight started and Ben was saved by Joe, that was observing the scene from the distance. Other soldiers expressed disgust to Chick and took Ben's side.

The film is not limited to scenes of discrimination and shows slow steps both White-Americans and Native-Americans take to learn more about each other, embracing differences and trying to find common ground. It gets depicted in the scenes when Whitehorse plays the music of his people to later be joined by his " protector" Sergeant Peter " Ox" Anderson. Unlike Enders, he gets very close with his protégée and starts playing his harmonica with Charlie. The curious thing about it is that when they play the first time together he tells Charlie to lead and follows his sound, the second time it happens, Charlie follows and Ox leads. It seems that it was a way John Woo used to show the dynamics of their relationships and that even though Charlie is a minority, Ox considers him equal. Despite that, the tendency of Navajo adapting to American lifestyle prevails in the movie: Ben becomes more " Americanized", his behavior and habits change, he starts smoking Joe's cigarettes. When asked by Joe about the reasons of him being in the army, Yahzee answers that he is there to protect his land, his country meaning the United States of America, which is another example of one-sided dynamics in the movie.

The shifting moment in the film, when Navajos get fully accepted by their white counterparts is their first and second battles together. In the moment

of hardship, when they lose their radio and get shelled by their fellow soldiers that think they are Japanese. Ben suggests to dress up as a Japanese soldier to steal their radio system. He succeeds and kills a person for the first time. He is a hero now, the one to save everyone. In the second Battle, Charlie wins Chick's respect by killing an enemy behind Chick's back. The last thought that Charlie wanted to kill him and was very surprised to see that he targeted a soldier behind his back, saving him. After the battle Chick for the first time in his life starts doubting stereotypes placed in his head by his father. Unfortunately, they couldn't become friends because Whitehorse dies from the grenade thrown by Enders. Charlie got captured by the Japanese and Joe had to perform his duty. That's when things become intense between him and Ben. Yahzee got mad and tried to kill him encouraged by Joe in his suicidal attempt to abandon his duty forever. After this, Ben changes, becomes more aggressive and determined, he doesn't feel any guilt anymore shooting the enemy. His hate makes him a killing machine. In their last battle the Marines are in trap, surrounded by the enemy on the mine field. Once again, Ben plays a crucial role in saving everyone, using the Navajo code. His relationship with Joe change too, when Enders saves him and refuses to kill him when the risk of getting caught is very high. Joe, having a second chance to lead his fellow soldiers doesn't make the same mistake he made in the beginning of the movie. This time he doesn't followed the order and gets everybody out of the death-trap. While saving injured Yahzee he gets shot and dies in his hands, calm finally having paid his dues.

In the last scene we see Yahzee, a survivor and a hero, respecting the

memory of his friend and protector Joe Enders. Wearing traditional clothes, he tells his son to remember the story of Joe's bravery.

"Windtalkers" draws attention to a very important and not widely known facet of history and the role of Navajo people in the US success in the WWII, honoring their bravery and devotion in the war lead by their oppressors. It discusses negative beliefs about the Native Americans that prevailed in the White-American society. The beliefs are that the Native Americans and Navajo in particular are savage violent people that hate the White and wish them dead. The examples of such beliefs are the phrases used in the movie by Marines. In the very beginning seeing Ben and Charlie, Ox is surprised that they "look pretty normal", to which Enders answers, "Expecting them to wear a war paint?", expressing the stereotype that all Native Americans are in their "war path". Further in the movie Chick calls Ben a "slanty-eyed savage" and expresses distrust in him as a companion, that is based on a negative belief that all Native Americans are cruel savages "sneaking" behind to "scalp" White people. The topic of scalping was brought up in the film several times. Another stereotype and negative belief was expressed in Chick's various jokes about "Injuns" being uneducated and able to only "scalp" Whites and "hunt salmon". The last he assumed Ben was doing when swimming in a river. The film though proves those beliefs to be wrong showing Ben's and Charlie's open-mindedness and willingness to win the war and protect the US which they consider their country despite living in a reservation. They end up saving their companions many times and playing crucial role in the US Marines' success in Japan. In fact, Ira Hayes, a Pima Native American was one of the six who raised an American Flag in Iwo Jima.

The movie tells us about many ways Native American people were discriminated. Joe Enders was the only one to get a medal for his bravery in a battle with the Japanese, the same battle that wouldn't happen if Ben Yahzee didn't propose to dress up as a Japanese soldier. He was the brave one and he saved soldiers that by mistake were shelled by other Marine squad. Despite the fact that Joe said that he wouldn't be able to do anything without Ben's help, the major ignored him. This is an example of political discrimination Native American people were facing. Playing a crucial role in the US victory, they were not honored the way they deserved to. Not much has changed since that time. Native Americans still face political discrimination, many of them not even being able to vote. American government doesn't find it necessary to grant people living in faraway reservations easy access to polls, making them travel sometimes from 50 to 120 mile roundtrip to make their choice during elections (Lerner). In one of the scenes Yahzee confessed that he was raised Catholic and attended a mission school in the reservation but one Sunday he forgot and was punished by being tied to a radiator in the basement for two days. This is a very good example of educational and cultural discrimination happening at that time. Not much changed after almost 60 years. Native American schools operated or overseen by American government get a very poor treatment from it. The conditions and environment in which children study are horrible, so there is no surprise in the reservations having very low high-school graduation rates. There were many allegations in mismanagement of funds that resulted in many schools being filled with mice and lacking basic equipment like chairs (Saccarro, 2014). Discrimination is still happening on



all levels and in all aspects of life, and this is not mentioning the horrible offensive tradition of using mascots in American sports.

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