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From the Daily: A racist past, a secret present

Michigamua remains far from reformed

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Student groups are taking steps to marginalize Michigamua, a secret honor society with a long record of elitism and racism. Students Supporting Affirmative Action, the South Asian Awareness Network and the Coalition to Cut the Contract with Coca-Cola cut their ties with three Michigamua members after their connections with the organization were made public. Some have called the expulsions counterproductive because Michigamua members Sam Woll, Neal Pancholi and Brian Hull are interested in reforming the oft-maligned honor society. However, Michigamua's past repeated failures to take proactive steps towards correcting - or even addressing - its problems means that the group lost the benefit of the doubt long ago.

Michigamua is a secret society founded in 1902 whose goal is, in the words of current member Brian Hull, "to serve the University above all else." Long after its inception, Michigamua's rituals and traditions have imitated and degraded Native American culture and practices. The offensiveness of the name "Michigamua" speaks for itself. Photographs of red-painted, bare-chested and feather-adorned inductees from as recent as 1966 are reminiscent of repulsive blackface minstrel shows. Michigamua claims to have moved beyond its racist past, saying on its website that "any past references to Native American symbolism that dated back to the early twentieth century were discarded by 1989."

In the past, however, Michigamua's reforms were only as a result of student pressure, and even then the changes have been at best half-hearted. Michigamua claims to have given up its mockery of Native American culture in 1989 after the Native American Student Association strongly pressured it to do so. Members of the Students of Color Coalition who occupied Michigamua's office space on the top floor of the Union tower for 37 days in 2000, however, found that Michigamua still held Native American artifacts that had been used in its rituals. Michigamua's strategy for dealing with its racist past is to simply ignore it. Michigamua's preference for whitewashing its racist past through pep-rally pro-Michigan posturing rather than acknowledging its past transgressions - as exemplified on its new website - makes it easy to understand why student organizations are trying to distance themselves from the secret society.

The actions of these student groups suggest that Michigamua is a relic from a time when society condoned such cultural appropriation. Michigamua attempts to draw its legitimacy from the idea that it is made up of campus leaders. By cutting ties with Michigamua members, SSAA, SAAN and the anti-Coke coalition are demonstrating that Michigamua has increasingly been reduced from an elite cadre of well-known student personalities to an ostracized and powerless handful of less prominent leaders clinging to an anachronism.

It will not be until the group changes its offensive name and discards its secrecy - reforms that should have been made decades ago - that its legitimacy as an organization can even be considered. Between Michigamua's tradition of secrecy and its historic resistance to change, however, these reforms appear unlikely to happen. The reaction its members receive on campus shows that Michigamua may be beyond reform. If they truly wish to "fight like hell for Michigan," Michigamua members' time may be better spent forming a new student group, free from the past racism and present exclusivity that interfere with Michigamua's efforts. Such a new group could divorce itself from Michigamua's racist past while still creating social networks to improve the University.

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