

Let's Bring Back the Chief and Stop Littering

On a recent trip from Virginia to Indiana, the friend who was driving me commented on the trash alongside the expressways. With the exception of Route 30's lightly traveled parts, he was right. Plastic bags, fast-food wrappers, beer bottles, and other debris uglified the roadways.

The motel where we stayed that weekend wasn't much better. Cigarette butts littered the grounds and the parking lot, likely because the motel offered neither outdoor trash cans nor cigarette disposal receptacles.

Back home, I've now noticed that the roads around here are also awash in garbage. The middle-class neighborhood where I live is litter-free, but as soon as I turn onto Rivermont Drive and head to town, the roadside ditches and patches of grass become a dumping ground for trash. Drivers either toss their refuse out the window or fail to secure it in their pickup trucks as they carry it to the county dump.

Similarly, a friend of mine reports that at his older, working-class complex of apartments in Richmond, Virginia, some neighbors frequently open their car doors and dump trash into the parking lot. Others throw their MacDonald's boxes and wrappers to the ground after eating, too lazy or too ignorant to carry them inside to a waste can.

It seems it's time to bring back the "Crying Indian."

The [Crying Indian advertisement](#), one of the most effective ads ever to appear on television, depicted a Native American canoeing in polluted waters. Landing his canoe and stepping to the bank, he stands surrounded by trash, and turning his face to the camera, he sheds a single tear.

“Some people have a deep, abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country. And some people don’t,” the ad said. “People start pollution. People can stop it.”

Such a lesson is now forgotten, judging from Elizabeth Cogar’s *Rappahannock Record* [article on the mounting litter problem](#). While government workers and volunteers do clean up roadside messes from time to time, picking up trash is only a temporary solution. Within days, the litter reappears.

Many places impose stiff fines for those caught littering, but catching these offenders, as one sheriff told Cogar, is virtually impossible. “That is a tough thing to do because most people are not going to toss anything out the window if they know a patrol car is close by.”

Cogar also spoke with Ben Lewis, a government official who supervises people convicted of misdemeanors and sentenced to perform community service by picking up trash. “The behavior [of the litterers] has to change,” Lewis said. “It’s a cultural thing. If you grow up seeing your parents throw trash out of the car and that’s what your family does, then you’re going to do it and your children will, too.”

I think Lewis just nailed the problem. So here’s a possible solution.

Suppose instead of teaching our students critical race theory—which divides them—we unite them behind an anti-litter campaign. School officials could put up anti-littering posters in the hallways. Teachers could offer reminders throughout the school year that pitching your trash into the streets and parks makes America ugly. Even better, once or twice a year, kids might spend an afternoon cleaning up the trash around their schools or in nearby parks. Once they understand the consequences of tossing that fast-food rubbish out the car window, they might bring that lesson home to their parents.

Here’s a program—inexpensive, simple, and with little burden

on academics—that everyone could get behind.

In the early 1960s, television featured the [“Susan Spotless” ads](#), in which an elementary-aged girl reminded those watching, that littering was shameful. She sang, “Please, please don’t be a litter bug, ’cause every litter bit hurts.” Like the Crying Indian, the Susan Spotless ads were effective, at least in my case, for that song has stayed in the storage unit of my head for over 50 years.

Years ago, New York City took to fighting crime by instituting the broken windows theory, the idea that visible signs of decay and junky neighborhoods increase crime. Ridding our streets of trash may not decrease crime, but it will boost the morale of citizens, restore our pride of place, and help make America beautiful again.

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