



## THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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# Navajo Nation Communications Director responds to Farmington Daily-Times story about Hawaii conference

In a letter to the editor of the Farmington Daily-Times, Navajo Nation Communications Director George Hardeen wrote on Tuesday:

In case you're wondering, the purpose of the story, "Navajo tribe sends 362-plus to Hawaii conference," was not so much to inform as it was to make the Navajo Nation, its educators and its president look wasteful, look frivolous and look bad. Here's why.

The Farmington Daily-Times generously labels this an "investigation." However, the piece contains not a single quote from any Navajo participant who attended, not a single allegation of wrongdoing, and not a single actual fact about how much the trip cost any of the dozens of independent school boards from across the Navajo Nation.

That's because this "investigation" consisted entirely of phone calls. Not only did the reporter never leave his office, he cites no documents (except a press release) and quotes no sources to support his supposition that something wrong was done. In journalistic parlance, this is what is called a "fishing expedition."

Instead, using logic that proceeds backward to a nefarious conclusion, the Daily-Times spends more time reporting what it didn't find out, lists officials it wasn't able to interview, and quotes opinions of a former council delegate who didn't actually attend rather than current officials who did. In essence, the reporter succeeds at showing readers that his research came up empty. But that didn't prevent the Daily-Times from leaving Navajos with a black eye in newspapers across the West.

By way of comparison, the story includes nothing about how many New Mexicans, Arizonans, Coloradoans or Utahans attended, only Navajos, and that was too many for the Daily-Times' liking.

*"The piece contains not a single quote from any Navajo participant who attended, not a single allegation of wrongdoing, and not a single actual fact about how much the trip cost."*

– Communications Director George Hardeen

The reporter employs words like "refused" and "denied" to have it appear that Navajo Nation officials had reason to avoid him. Through all this, his sleuthing was unable to unearth just how much the trip cost – presumably the premise for the piece. So he guesstimates what it cost others, did some math, and deduces a number that the Navajo Nation presumably paid. No telling if it's accurate or not, but it's the best he could do and we're left to trust him. Should we?

Let's consider what's missing from this scoop.

- Nowhere does the story report that each Navajo school district is autonomous and that each decides for itself what conferences to send participants to. Instead, both the headline and lead specifically state that the Navajo Nation sent them. Obviously, this is misleading and untrue.

- Nowhere does the story report that Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., was invited to the conference as a panel member, or that he went because education has been a priority throughout his administration.

- Nowhere does the story distinguish how many participants were independent school board members, school district employees or Navajo Nation workers, inferring that there is no difference among them so long as they are all Navajos.

- The story leaves readers thinking that President Shirley has authority to approve or deny their travel, which is also untrue.

- And, as for what he thinks about the number of Navajo participants, nowhere does it report that he would have no way of knowing, or reason to inquire, about the number that attended.

Instead, this story uses journalistic legerdemain to make it appear that President Shirley and other officials wouldn't talk to the reporter because they had something to hide. This, of course, is nonsense. Only once did Mr. Frolik ask to speak to the president, and at that time he was out of the office and unavailable, and I told him so. His "repeated attempts" were nothing more than Friday phone messages left after his editor pressured him to get a quote.

The bottom line is that this story was not intended for Farmington or Navajo readers anyway. It was written for readers far beyond Navajoland and, just as evident, for that future panel of judges who issue newspaper awards.

Why else would the reporter feel compelled to include where Navajo Nation is located within the United States, and what states borders it?

Why else would he include Navajo unemployment rates that Daily-Times readers are well acquainted with?

Why else would he juxtapose the poverty of the Navajo Nation to the overall cost of the conference, suggesting

"abuse of funds for a junket" without citing a single source to substantiate it or making that allegation?

Why else would he opine that Navajo participants attended because of a "sincere belief that this large of a delegation was necessary to make needed improvements" without anyone saying anything near that?

Why? Because the Daily-Times meant to inflict harm by insinuation and win a prize for itself doing so.

Paragraph by paragraph, this story is laced with supposition, finger-pointing and judgment while completely devoid of fact demonstrating misdeed. It isn't even certain it has the number of attendees right. Rather than good investigative journalism, this is dreadful, self-serving journalism.

When there is actual wrongdoing, by all means report it. When there are laws broken, cite them. When someone does something they shouldn't, expose it. Yet we're left wondering who among the Navajo participants the newspaper thinks should have attended the conference, who shouldn't have, and why. That, of course, is a decision for school districts, chapters and Navajo Nation leaders to make, and they did.

The only thing special about this "special report" is the revelation of what the Daily-Times does not know about the Navajo Nation, and its arrogance to presume it knows better. I look forward to its follow-up.

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