

Mexican Stamps Racist, Civil Rights Leaders Say

Images Feature Popular Cartoon Character

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The Mexican government issued a series of stamps yesterday depicting a dark-skinned Jim Crow-era cartoon character with greatly exaggerated eyes and lips, infuriating black and Hispanic civil rights leaders for the second time in weeks.

Mexican postal officials said the five-stamp series features Memin Pinguin, a character from a comic book created in the 1940s, because he is beloved in Mexico. A spokesman for the Mexican Embassy described the depiction as a cultural image that has no meaning and is not intended to offend.

"Just as Speedy Gonzalez has never been interpreted in a racial manner by the people in Mexico," embassy spokesman Rafael Laveaga said. ". . . He is a cartoon character. I am certain that this commemorative postage stamp is not intended to be interpreted on a racial basis in Mexico or anywhere else."

But the leaders of the NAACP, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, the National Council of La Raza and the National Urban League denounced the image in strong terms, calling it the worst kind of black stereotype. The curator of a Michigan museum that collects Jim Crow memorabilia said the Memin Pinguin caricature is a classic "pickaninny" -- a black child, oafish and with apelike features.

"It is offensive," said the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, who like other leaders called on Mexican President Vicente Fox to apologize and stop circulation of the stamps. Jackson vowed to lead a demonstration at Mexican consulates if Fox does not do so.

It was the second time in seven weeks that Jackson called on Fox to apologize for a racial offense. In May, Fox apologized for saying that Mexican migrants in the United States work jobs that "even blacks don't want," a comment he said was taken out of context.

Marc H. Morial, executive director of the National Urban League, joined Jackson in calling on President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to denounce the stamps. "It's outrageous, it's offensive, and it really raises the question of whether President Fox's apology was sincere and meaningful," Morial said.

Janet Murguia, president of the National Council of La Raza, said it is "impossible to overstate how appalled and offended I am, not only by the stamp but by the reaction of the Mexican postal service." She added: "Hispanic Americans and all other Americans will and should be equally outraged."

David Pilgrim, curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., said images such as that of Memin Pinguin are prolific in Mexico, Latin America and Japan. "I'm disappointed but not shocked," he said. "This is consistent with what we in the United States would refer to as a pickaninny image. It's disappointing when you find a government putting its stamp on racism."

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