

Opinions

Here's something I'd be thankful for: Ridding football of racial slurs

By Jefferson Keel

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Thanksgiving, as most Americans know, is the day we commemorate the bountiful harvests that brought together the newly arrived Pilgrims and members of the Wampanoag tribe at Plymouth. And how will many Washington-area residents celebrate their holiday? By watching their local professional football team, bearing a slur against Native people as its name, compete — against the Dallas Cowboys, no less.

Fifty years ago, the [National Congress of American Indians](#), a national governing body formed to express Indian Country's unified will, took a groundbreaking step to foster a better understanding of how disparaging words and symbols dehumanize Native people. Through resolution, it launched a formal campaign to teach the public about how Native-“themed” [names and mascots](#) harm Native people socially, psychologically and academically, and to eradicate those names and mascots from the sports landscape once and for all.

Since then, the NCAI, tribal nations and thousands of partners have [succeeded in eliminating](#) more than two-thirds of these mascots from sports at all levels. In January, in a watershed moment, Major League Baseball [announced](#) that its Cleveland franchise would retire its grotesque “Chief Wahoo” caricature. And this month, students at one of Canada's most prestigious universities overwhelmingly [voted](#) to replace the university's “Redmen” mascot.

Yet the R-word racial slur of the Washington football team remains, an antiquated vestige of a less enlightened past, despite the team's desperate ploy to make its fans and Americans believe that the name somehow honors Native people.

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no honor in this slur, and history proves there never has been. As we have experienced, this slur is about hate, making us feel less than, and diminishing our rightful place as sovereign nations with the ability to control our own lives and futures.

Consider its genocidal origins, epitomized in an [1863 Minnesota newspaper article](#) promoting that state's policy to exterminate its Native inhabitants: “The State reward for dead Indians has been increased to 200 dollars for every red-skin sent to Purgatory. This sum is more than the dead bodies of all the Indians east of the Red River are worth.”

Witness its adoption by team owner George Preston Marshall, an avowed racist who [fought](#) fervently against integrating African American players. Backed by white supremacists with slogans such as “Keep Redskins White,” Marshall was ultimately forced to add African American players to his team in 1962, seven years after [the rest of the league](#). Upon his death, [his will mandated](#) that none of his money be used for “any purpose which supports or employs the principle of racial integration in any form.”

Observe how it has long been used as a weapon of animosity and ridicule. In one of countless stories we have heard from Native people, National Museum of the American Indian director Kevin Gover recalls: “Growing up in Oklahoma, it was a racist taunt that was deployed against Indian kids like me, and Indian adults for that matter. I don’t feel honored by the word.”

Reasonable people open to learning these facts and stories recognize the need, as NAACP President Derrick Johnson [put it](#), to throw this “dictionary-defined racial slur into the dustbin of history, where it belongs.” Reasonable people see the hypocrisy of the Washington team clutching to its mascot when the National Football League wouldn’t dare name a new franchise the “Blackskins,” “Yellowskins” or “Brownskins” to denote other peoples of color. Reasonable people understand that to reassociate this slur with Robert F. Kennedy by [relocating the team’s home field](#) to the old RFK Stadium site — next to a new memorial in his name — would desecrate Kennedy’s legacy of racial justice that placed Native people at its core. Reasonable people get that it’s about making a simple, *moral* choice to be on the right side of history.

Yet current team owner Daniel Snyder feels he shouldn’t have to get it. He believes that his billionaire status and the popularity of the product he peddles absolve him from extending a modicum of respect to tribal nations and peoples. He is betting that through a few, window-dressing [donations to tribal communities](#), coupled with annual exercises in disingenuous pageantry such as this month’s “[American Indian Heritage Month](#)” charade at FedEx Field, he can avoid doing what a growing number of Americans understand is the right thing to do.

Tribal nations fight against these mascots because they demean us and dismiss the fact we are still here. Despite everything done to us, we have persevered, and more and more we are thriving. [We are](#) 6 million people and 600 nations strong, and we are perfectly capable of telling our own stories of who we were and who we are *today*. We don’t need others to tell the world about who *they think we are* through offensive mascots that do nothing but dishonor and misrepresent us.

It is long past time for Snyder and the NFL to be reasonable and do the right thing. For that, Indian Country would give thanks.

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