

Why the Washington, DC, football team needed to change its name

## **This victory won't amount to much if Americans don't understand why racist team names are a problem.**

by [Kaitlin B. Curtice](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue



Protest against Washington, DC, football team name, Minneapolis, 2014. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Fibonacci Blue](#).

The football team in Washington, DC, that for decades has had a racial slur for a name is finally in the process of changing its name and logo. This is a huge moment, born from a time when a pandemic and the ongoing reality of police brutality toward black people have sparked change and revealed who we are as a nation.

Indigenous people have been fighting for a long time to make racist mascots go away. We have created artwork—such as [More Than a Word](#), a film by Dakota historian John Little and artist Kenn Little—to document the problem throughout history. Amanda Blackhorse, a Diné Nation psychiatric social worker, has been waging a legal fight for name change for years. Crystal Echo Hawk, of [the group IllumiNative](#), led the recent effort to put pressure on the DC team to change its

name.

It would be a huge disservice to the indigenous activists and grassroots organizations that fought for this change if we gave all the credit to companies like FedEx, which threatened to take its name off the team's stadium in suburban Maryland, or Target, which chose at last to stop carrying the team's merchandise. Still, it's incredible to see the different kinds of pressure put on the team to make this change.

But this victory won't amount to much if Americans don't understand why racist mascots and team names are a problem.

For many indigenous people, this is a personal issue that affects who we are every single day. Our children deserve better than to see themselves portrayed in derogatory ways, their trauma celebrated by people who claim they are honoring us.

Last year a teacher at my children's elementary school in Atlanta, home of the baseball team named the Braves, led the entire student body in the tomahawk chop, a racist chant based on harmful and violent stereotypes of indigenous peoples. I sat with my kindergartener and second-grader that afternoon to explain what the chant means and why it hurts us as people. When my younger child saw classmates doing the tomahawk chop again at school the next day, he was reprimanded by his teacher for telling them to stop.

After multiple conversations with the administration, the school addressed the issue in a newsletter to parents. But it never fully explained why something like the tomahawk chop or a racist mascot deserves to be banned. For many students, teachers, and their supervisors, indigenous people are characters who exist only in the past—who once lived and interacted with the pilgrims at Thanksgiving, then disappeared.

"Invisibility is a constant reality for Native people," I wrote in [my recent book \*Native\*](#), "as we are pushed behind sports mascots that make us all out to be savage warriors or people who have died off and no longer exist. . . . So much of America has held up these stereotypes, celebrating the pastime of sports instead of the real lives of Native peoples in America."

This isn't a new problem. [In 2005, the American Psychological Association called for an end](#) to all American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities used by

schools, universities, sports teams, and more. This recommendation cited research that found that these practices

undermin[e] the educational experiences of members of all communities—especially those who have had little or no contact with indigenous peoples. The symbols, images and mascots teach non-Indian children that it's acceptable to participate in culturally abusive behavior and perpetuate inaccurate misconceptions about American Indian culture.

The APA also noted that such mascots and images establish “an unwelcome and often times hostile learning environment for American Indian students that affirms negative images/stereotypes that are promoted in mainstream society.” And it cited research by Tulalip tribal citizen Stephanie Fryberg at the University of Arizona, who found that mascots have a negative effect on the way indigenous children see themselves.

If we don't understand the problem in the first place, we won't work to make lasting change. As we celebrate pipelines being shut down, Columbus statues toppling to the ground, and racist mascots being retired, we also have to ask if America will finally wake up to its true white supremacist history. This is not only about racist mascots. It's also about a history of genocide and erasure and the myth that America was an empty landscape before the settlers arrived.

Telling the truth means admitting that we have a problem, and as we have seen again and again, that is a hard thing to do. It's what got us here in the first place, and it's why thousands of Americans constantly say they are honoring us with the tomahawk chop and a chant, with a headdress and war paint. We deserve better, and we always have.

Will the change in one football team's name lead to more lasting change? That will depend on how much this is about commerce and how much it is about Native lives. It will also depend on whether indigenous people who fought for this change will be at the center of the conversation as we move forward.

This decision is a big one, and it means something. But it's not enough. We need to see more change that will show the world that indigenous peoples never deserved the genocide, hate, and ongoing oppression we have faced.

*This article was first published by Religion News Service, used by permission. It appears in the print edition under the title "What's in a name?"*