



Change the Mascot!

Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter's Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ

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Newark, Delaware

Thank you for this opportunity to let me speak to this gathering of the United Church of Christ. It is a true honor to be asked to speak to an organization with such an historic record standing up for the cause of civil rights and standing on the right side of history. This is the church that worked with Dr. King against television stations refusing to acknowledge the U.S. civil rights movement. It is the church that has stood with the United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez in their historic struggle for civil rights. And now, in that same spirit, it is the Church that is standing with our "Change the Mascot" campaign.

I would like to begin my remarks by first recognizing and acknowledging the work of Reverend Graylan Hagler. He has been one of the leading voices for civil rights and justice throughout the entire country. I have been fortunate enough to work with him and members of his church and I cannot thank him enough for the solidarity and leadership he had provided on this issue from the very beginning of our efforts.

As you well recognize, the campaign to stop the \$9-billion-a-year NFL from continuing to promote and profit off a dictionary defined racial slur is more than just a campaign against a team name. It is also a campaign against something much bigger. It is a campaign against the values of George Preston Marshall, the infamous segregationist who first gave the team this name, and who promoted the abhorrent values of the Confederacy. It is an effort against billionaires like Marshall's predecessor Dan Snyder - powerful elites who use their wealth to continue profiting off of an epithet that was screamed at my ancestors as they were forced at gunpoint off their lands. In short, it is a campaign against a racial slur that has been institutionalized, commercialized and commodified.

But, as you also know, this is not just a campaign *against* something. As important, it is also a campaign *for* something much bigger than an NFL team's name. It is a campaign *for* the ideals of mutual respect. It is a campaign *for* all the children of color in this country who do not deserve to be told by a sports league that they should be denigrated on the basis of their alleged skin color. It is a campaign *for* a country that believes in honoring its diversity, rather than denigrating it - and turning it into a hurtful mascot.

We are only a few weeks away from the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In many ways, our hard fought journey since that landmark accomplishment has been made profound progress. This is certainly a more fair, just and equal society since the days of Jim Crow - the days when this country dishonored the Declaration of Independence's rhetoric about equality by nonetheless enforcing a veritable apartheid state.

And yet, five decades after the Civil Rights Act, we still see a racial epithet on our television screens every Sunday during football season. Five decades after our Congress enshrined the idea of equality, a global corporation called the NFL still insists on preserving a business model based on insulting Native Americans.

Five decades after Martin Luther King's landmark legislative accomplishment, a billionaire is still marketing merchandise encouraging America to see its first people as red-faced mascots.

Team and League officials claim that denigrating Native Americans is actually a way to honor us. At best, that is willfully ignorant, and more likely it is willfully insulting to our intelligence. Calling me, my family and Native people's everywhere the R-word is not a way to honor us - it is a way to dehumanize us.

Of course, as any casual reading of history shows, we are used to this kind of treatment, because it has been - for far too long - the norm. But as the Change the Mascot campaign shows, that is now changing. More and more Americans are saying that the era of the rich and powerful dehumanizing people on the basis of their ethnicity is completely unacceptable. And so this campaign has received a groundswell of support from religious organizations, civil rights groups, public health organizations, professional athletes, editorial boards, Republican and Democratic Members of Congress and even the President of the United States.

Last month half of the United States Senate took a bold stand against racism and signed a letter that was sent to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell urging him and the league to take action to change the name of the Washington D.C. team. The letter urged the NFL to take similar action to the NBA and send a clear message that racism and bigotry have no place in professional sports stating “Now is the time for the NFL to act. The Washington, D.C. football team is on the wrong side of history. What message does it send to punish slurs against African Americans while endorsing slurs against Native Americans?”

That letter was followed by one sent to every player in the NFL asking them to also take a stand against the use of the derogatory R-word. The letter sent by the Oneida Indian Nation and the National Congress of American Indians was signed by over seventy civil rights groups and leaders, including the Central Atlantic Conference United Church of Christ and the Reverend Graylan Hagler, The NAACP, The ADL, The National Urban League among many others. Those more than seventy groups collectively represent millions of Americans across the country.

The momentum of our campaign continues to grow as more and more voices are added to the call for change. Human rights expert and United Nations Special

Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples James Anaya has called the use of the R-word by the NFL a “disparaging term that fails to respect and honour the historical and cultural legacy of the Native Americans in the U.S.”

Legendary Olympian and civil rights icon John Carlos has spoken out against the name and even current NFL players like Champ Bailey who said “when it starts peeling off old scabs and people are pitching a fit about it because it's degrading to them, then you've got to make a change,” have voiced opposition to the use of the racial epithet.

And just this week the Yocha Dehe Tribe in California , standing in solidarity with our campaign, paid to have an incredibly powerful commercial about the opposition to this name air in major markets during the NBA finals. The response to the airing of the ad has been nothing short of amazing.

This campaign is no longer only about how the use of this term affects Native Americans, it is about what kind of country we all want to live in. What everyone should be encouraged and inspired by is the level of support this effort is gaining

because people want to live in a society where all people, regardless of their ethnicity or skin color, are treated equal.

This brings us to the resolution being considered here today by the United Church of Christ. The UCC is truly one of the key partners in this greater effort. With your help, we cannot only end this ongoing offense against my own heritage, but we can win a major victory for a more inclusive society.

This is our chance to relegate this language and iconography to the historical scrap heap and to usher in an era where mutual respect finally becomes the norm, rather than the exception.