



Change the Mascot!

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Oneida Indian Nation on D.C. Team Name: NFL Must Finally Stop Marketing Hate and Bigotry

In a speech previewing his tribe's meeting with top NFL officials, the Oneida Indian Nation Representative says professional football must stop promoting the idea that America's first people should be persecuted on the basis of their alleged skin color

ONEIDA NATION HOMELANDS (NY) (October 28, 2013) The following are the prepared remarks of Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter at the United South & Eastern Tribes' annual meeting taking place in Cherokee, North Carolina this week. USET collectively represents 26 federally recognized Tribes at the regional and national level to promote Indian leadership, improve the quality of life for American Indians, and protect Indian rights and resources on Tribal lands.

These remarks come two days before Halbritter and other representatives for the Oneida Indian Nation are scheduled to meet with top officials of the National Football League about the Nation's Change the Mascot Campaign.

REMARKS OF ONEIDA INDIAN NATION REPRESENTATIVE RAY HALBRITTER

For obvious reasons, I don't like saying the name of Washington's NFL team. I usually refer to it as the R-word, because it is so hurtful. But for a brief time today, among this esteemed group, I am going to use the word because I want us to collectively confront the pain that it incurs.

Redskins - it is a word that is in the news a lot lately, and finally, for the right reasons. Much of America is becoming aware that there is something deeply wrong with this slur that they've gotten so used to hearing when they turn on a football game. In the last few months, something has changed - we are experiencing a rare moment of consciousness in which many are asking the important "why" questions. Why is a professional sports team still using the racist name given to it by one of this country's most famous segregationists, George Preston Marshall? Why in the 21st century is this racial epithet still being used to market the professional football team that is supposed to represent the capital of a diverse and tolerant nation?

As Native peoples, we should be thrilled to see this awakening. But for all the media coverage that portrays this as a new controversy, and for all the attempts by some to downplay it as unimportant, this most certainly is not new - and it most certainly is important. The ancestors of everyone in this room learned long ago what it meant to be seen as a redskin in the way George Preston Marshall meant it - and they didn't learn that lesson in the glare of the cameras or during an abstract argument on a cable television set. They learned it in their day-to-day experiences.

They learned what being deemed a redskin meant when they were called that name as they were being thrown off their land at gunpoint. They learned it when that word was screamed at them as they were being herded onto reservations. And they learned it then - as we all do now - when anytime they raise objections to being slurred they are told to sit down, shut up and stay in their place.

Everyone in this room has a personal story about when he or she first realized what it felt like to be looked upon not as a human, but as a redskin. Yours is no doubt similar to mine. I learned what "redskin" means through my family - and specifically, through the experience of seeing them left to die by a local fire department that didn't think it was their responsibility to help us because we are Native Americans. They saw us not as individual human beings or fellow Americans, but as people that didn't deserve to be treated as equals. They saw us as redskins.

That was three decades ago, and in the interim we have done everything we can in our community to be treated with dignity. It has not been an easy road. At every turn, we have been told that we do not deserve the most basic forms of respect. We have been told our land is not ours. We have been told we have no right to sovereignty. We have been told that our economic development efforts could not succeed. Maybe worst of all, those who worked so hard to disenfranchise us and eliminate our culture - have then cited their own success in persecuting us to then claim that we are not really true Native Americans and that we have no claim to our own sacred heritage.

We have, in short, been treated not as humans or fellow Americans, but as redskins.

But out of that experience, that struggle and that pain, I am proud to report that there has been enormous progress. In Central New York we have not only built an economic development engine out of what was once a muddy cornfield, but we have also built a true sense of community and mutual respect. This was embodied most recently in both our historic agreement with the State of New York and in the brave act of a local high school in Cooperstown. Just a few months ago, the students there voted to change their school name from a racial slur. It was a powerful recognition that we are humans and fellow Americans - and not redskins.

This is the simple, minimal recognition we now seek from the National Football League. After our experience in Central New York, we decided to launch our "Change the Mascot" campaign because, as those students showed, this is a new America that is finally recognizing there is strength in mutual respect.

As a proud sponsor of the NFL, the Oneida Indian Nation believes the league is a unifying force and can play a constructive role in fostering that respect. But we also believe it cannot continue to be that positive force if it remains committed to putting tens of millions of dollars behind marketing, popularizing and promoting a racial slur that says to the first peoples of this land that we are still nothing but redskins.

As the Change the Mascot campaign has gained strength, some have asked why we believe this issue is so important. Those who remain pathologically committed to the name - and to denigrating us as redskins - insist we have more important things to worry about. As a public relations tactic, I will admit that this is a brilliantly deceptive line - it allows those who want to keep slandering us to obscure their position by pretending they really care about our well-being, even though these are the same voices who almost never devote any resources to reporting on the Native American community. They only seem to care about us and to report on us when they fear they may no longer be able to minstrelize us as mascots.

That said, there are three simple answers to the question of why the effort to change the Washington team name is so important.

The first is very simple: If, as these critics contend, a professional team's name doesn't really matter and isn't all that important, then why do they so strongly oppose our calls to change it? If it isn't a big deal, then why the vehement resistance?

The answer, I fear, is that those who are so committed to using this name do, in fact, see it as important. I fear they see it as important because they believe they are *entitled* to continue slandering an entire group of people, regardless of the serious cultural, political and public health consequences of such a slander. And by believing that, perhaps they fear that any challenge to such entitlement is a challenge to their overall authority.

The second answer to the question about why the name change campaign is so significant relates to the significance of the NFL in our society.

Football may just be a game, but the NFL is a \$9-billion-a-year business and arguably the single most powerful cultural force in America, which makes it one of the most powerful cultural forces on the globe. You may love that, you may hate that, but it is a fact. In light of that, it is fair to say that for many Americans, their most explicit and direct contact with the very idea of Native American culture is the Washington team's racist name. On billboards, on t-shirts, on hats, and on millions of TV screens every week, millions of people are told that we are not Americans - we are redskins. Pretending that's somehow not important is preposterous and dishonest, especially when social science research has definitively proven that such mass persecution has destructive public health consequences for our families, our children and our people as a whole.

The third answer to the question about why this is such an important question has to do with self-determination.

Those who defend the use of the word "redskins" present themselves as the sole arbiters of what is - and what is not - acceptable in 21st century America. They present themselves that way because those engineering the racial assaults - rather than the targets of such assaults - have always claimed supremacy. People like Washington team owner Dan Snyder insist that their supposed right to target, intimidate and persecute people on the basis of their alleged skin color inherently negates the right of others to be free of such persecution. The fight to change Washington's team name, then, is a larger fight to finally say that in a 21st century America that values mutual respect and civility over subjugation and hostility, such a cynical assumption is no longer acceptable.

The recent words of the Washington team's own hall of fame wide receiver Art Monk underscore this point. He said: "If Native Americans feel like Redskins is offensive to them, then who are we to say to them 'No, it's not'?"

The questions raised by the Change the Mascot campaign are far bigger than mere questions about a team name. They are, in fact, the ultimate questions: what kind of nation will America be and who gets a say in that destiny?

Those questions are now being answered in a different and encouraging way, as a broad coalition is growing against the Washington team name. From religious leaders to civil rights groups to members of Congress to the President of the United States, organizations and individuals representing millions of people are saying that this will be a different America. Even news organizations are starting to refuse to keep using this ugly racial slur. While their political bureaus too often defer to those in power, their sports reporters are traditionally trained to focus more on the human stories - and they are consequently now asking the tough questions of the NFL and the team's management. They want to know: which kind of nation does the NFL want America to be? Does it want this country to be one that still treats its first people as redskins? Or will it be on the right side of history - the side that deems the r-word unacceptable, and is willing to put that painful epithet in history's trash bin where it belongs?

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell recently changed his tune and said the league should be listening to the critics of the Washington team name. At the same time, Mr. Snyder sent out a letter to all season ticket holders saying he would listen as well. This is our moment to make them hear us. This is our moment to declare for ourselves, our families, our children, our grandchildren and the generations not yet born that we will no longer be treated as mascots. This is our moment to say we do not deserve to be assailed by racial slurs, we do not deserve to be looked upon as subhuman, we do not deserve to be treated anymore as redskins. We deserve one simple thing - to be treated as what we are: Americans.

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