



The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Acknowledges Decision to Change the Name of the Washington D.C. Football Team

July 17, 2020

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights by majority vote acknowledges the decision of Washington D.C.'s professional football team to cease using an offensive term as its official team name after severe economic pressure was applied by corporate sponsors.¹ We urge other non-Native professional teams, schools, and athletic associations to discontinue their use of team names and imagery associated with Native Americans.

The Commission has long held that the use of Native American nicknames and imagery for sports teams and in schools is offensive, as it mocks and trivializes Native American culture.² In the context of schools,³ we noted these portrayals detract from schools' educational mission, have the potential to create racially hostile environments intimidating to Native students, and "prevent non-Native Americans from understanding the true historical and cultural experiences of American Indians."⁴ It normalizes the legacy of oppression perpetrated against tribes culminating in dislocation, relocation, and death of many Native Americans.

Professional sports teams likewise wield significant cultural influence, disseminating imagery that can be pervasive throughout their fan bases and society. Team names

¹ Les Carpenter, *Washington's NFL team to retire Redskins name, following sponsor pressure and calls for change*, The Washington Post (July 13, 2020)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/07/13/redskins-change-name-announcement/>.

² U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Statement on the Use of Native American Images and Nicknames as Sports Symbols* (2001), <https://www.usccr.gov/press/archives/2001/041601st.htm>. We reiterated these points in our 2018 report, noting "[t]he White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education found that the use of Native mascots by school institutions can perpetuate negative stereotypes, encourage bullying, and can harm students psychologically." U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans* at 120-21 (2018) <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/12-20-Broken-Promises.pdf> (citing U.S. Dep't of Education, White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, School Environment Listening Sessions Final Report (October 2015), 39, <https://sites.ed.gov/whiaiane/files/2015/10/school-environment-listening-sessions-final-report.pdf>).

³ There are approximately 2,200 high schools that utilize a Native American team name. Gillian R. Brassil et al., *In Campaign Against Racism, Team Names Get New Scrutiny*, N.Y. Times, (Jul. 10, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/sports/football/washington-redskins-name-change-mascots.html>.

⁴ *Id.* See also Nebraska Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Statement of the Nebraska Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Regarding the Use of Native American Indian Mascots in Non-Native Public Schools* (July 10, 2019) <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2019/07-10-Statement-of-the-NSAC-USCCR.pdf>.

referencing Native Americans tend to lead fans to develop traditions that rely on untrue stereotypes of Native Americans, such as the “tomahawk chop” cheer used by fans of teams such as the Kansas City Chiefs⁵ and the Atlanta Braves.⁶ Although teams can discourage or de-emphasize such traditions, as the Braves did after criticism,⁷ the team names themselves, which denigrate and disrespect tribal honorifics and misappropriate characteristics of persons, perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Ubiquitous branded items produced to support the teams create an environment saturated with inappropriate and insensitive portrayals of Native Americans, encouraging a reductive, limited, and negative view of Native culture.⁸ They inhibit accurate understanding of the experiences of Native Americans and encourage biases against them contrary to their rich and diverse history.⁹

While the Commission acknowledges the sponsors, corporations, and fans who withhold or withdraw financial support from teams that refuse to change, these tactics are welcome exceptions, not the rule. This issue should not be decided as a matter of economics, but out of basic respect for the history, rights, and dignity of Native Americans.

The Commission has studied deep and persistent discrimination against Native Americans reflected in repeated failures of the federal government to fulfill its obligations to them.¹⁰ Throughout our country’s history, the federal government often has ignored treaty obligations made to Native Americans, and has failed to adequately provide resources for their well-being, despite promising numerous times to do so. These failures cannot be separated from stereotypical images contributing to an inaccurate view of Native people. Moving beyond a two-dimensional understanding of contemporary Native American life is necessary to achieve the equitable principles this country aspires to.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: in our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For information about the Commission, please visit <http://www.usccr.gov> and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

⁵ John Eligon, *Celebrating the Kansas City Chiefs, the Chop Divides*, The N.Y. Times (Jan. 29, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/29/sports/football/chiefs-tomahawk-chop.html>.

⁶ Dayn Perry, and R.J. Anderson, *Atlanta Braves unlikely to consider name change; team will reportedly discuss use of 'tomahawk chop*, CBS Sports (July 7, 2020) <https://www.cbssports.com/mlb/news/atlanta-braves-unlikely-to-consider-name-change-team-will-reportedly-discuss-use-of-tomahawk-chop/>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ See Bogage, Jacob, *The Cleveland Indians’ season is over, and so is Chief Wahoo’s 71-year run*, Washington Post (Oct. 9, 2018) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/10/09/cleveland-indians-season-is-over-so-is-chief-wahoos-year-run/>.

⁹ National Congress of Indian Americans, *Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports & The Era Of Harmful “Indian” Sports Mascots* (Oct. 2013), http://www.ncai.org/attachments/PolicyPaper_mijApMoUWDbjqFtjAYzQWlqLdrwZvsYfakBwTHpMATcOroYolpN_NCAI_Harmful_Mascots_Report_Ending_the_Legacy_of_Racism_10_2013.pdf.

¹⁰ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans* (2018) <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/12-20-Broken-Promises.pdf>.