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Banning "Redskins" From the Sports Page: The Ethics and Politics of Native American Nicknames

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□ In February 1992, *The (Portland) Oregonian* announced it would no longer use sports team names that readers may find offensive, such as *Redskins*, *Redmen*, *Indians*, and *Braves*. Many journalists have criticized *The Oregonian's* decision, calling it an abandonment of the journalistic principles of objectivity and neutrality. This article addresses the ethical/political issues involved in the controversy through an examination of commentaries by journalists published in newspapers and public comments made by journalists critical of *The Oregonian*. After evaluating the explicit and implicit assumptions behind those criticisms of *The Oregonian*, a defense of the newspaper's decision that relies on more overtly political arguments than the paper's managers used will be offered.

Images of Native Americans

A discussion of newspaper policy about this issue must start with the history of Euro-Americans' clash with North America's indigenous peoples and of contemporary political concerns—a story of genocide and continuing anti-Native American racism in the United States. The relationship is best understood as one of colonizer to colonized (Durham, 1992, p. 427), and an issue such as the naming of sports teams cannot be considered outside this political, economic, and cultural context.

Central to resistance to anti-Native American racism and liberatory change is (a) the elimination of incorrect information about and racist stereotyping of Native Americans that is prevalent in non-Native American culture, and (b) the dissemination of information and analyses that explain the past and present state of Native America (American Indian Media Task Force, 1991; Giago, 1991; Stedman, 1982). This article is con-



cerned primarily with the elimination of incorrect information about and racist stereotyping of Native Americans.

Rouse and Hanson (1991) summarize the long-standing negative stereotypes of Native Americans as of people "living in the past, clinging to tribal ways and primitive beliefs ill-suited to success in modern society" (p. 3), and characterized by laziness, undependability, drunkenness, and general incompetence. Even depictions of positive characteristics—Native American wisdom or bravery, for example, are often in a racist context. Churchill (1992) pointed out that mainstream media routinely (a) frame Native Americans as "creatures from another time," (b) deny differences among Native American peoples by constructing a false all-encompassing "Indian," and (c) define Native American cultures through Eurocentric values (pp. 233-239). Hanson and Rouse (1987) suggested that while those stereotypes are slowly changing, they are deeply embedded in American historical and contemporary consciousness.

Many scholars have argued that negative stereotypes of Native Americans have been central to the justification and continuation of Euro-American colonization, as White literature and popular culture have constructed Native American culture as more primitive and less legitimate. According to Churchill (1992), stereotypes are "an historical requirement of an imperial process" by which Euro-Americans have been conditioned to accept a policy of "non-stop expropriation and genocide of the native population throughout U.S. history" (pp. 28-29). The key, Churchill argues, is not the specific images of Native Americans used, but the way in which they are consigned to a "mythical realm" (p. 38). The result, according to Deloria (1980), is that Native Americans "are forced to deal with American fantasies about the Indians of White imagination rather than the reality of the present" (p. xiv).

Sports Team Names

The issue of sports teams' use of Native American names and images has been widely discussed in the popular media of the 1990s, sparked by the Atlanta Braves baseball team and its fans' use of the "tomahawk chop," and the Washington Redskins football team's name. However, discussion and activism on this issue goes back at least two decades. American Indian Movement activist Russell Means threatened to sue the Cleveland Indians baseball team for defamation in 1972 over the team's Native American logo. In that same year, Stanford University changed its team name from "Indians" to "Cardinals," and other colleges and high schools have taken similar action, especially in recent years. A variety of local government bodies and agencies have received complaints or voted on resolutions that condemn the use of Native American names and mascots. Most recently, a group of Native Americans has gone to court to strip the Washington football team of federal trademark protection for "Redskins" (*Suzan Show Harjo, et al. v. Pro Football, Inc.*).



To date, no professional team has changed its name or logos. Cleveland Indians officials argue that their name honors the first Native American professional baseball player, who played for Cleveland from 1897-1899. The Washington team, which also has refused to consider a change, has said the name "was never intended to offend anyone" and "has reflected the positive attributes of American Indians such as dedication, courage, and pride" (McCraw, 1992, p. B1).

For journalists, there are two questions to consider, one general and one specific to their trade. First, is it ethically and politically responsible for sports teams that have no connection to Native Americans to use Native American names and images for nicknames and logos? Second, if teams retain those names and logos, should news media outlets independently choose to stop using them in news accounts? The answers offered here are no and yes, respectively. Before arguing that case, this article will look at the industry's response to *The Oregonian's* decision.

Published commentaries by journalists will be used to frame the issue and advance ethical and political arguments. Applicable commentaries were identified through a Lexis-Nexis search of all publications on the data base from the date of *The Oregonian's* decision through February 1993. There were 134 stories that included commentaries and news accounts, some of which were short news items, often drawn from the same wire story. Stories in journalism reviews produced additional commentaries and comments from journalists at publications not on the data base.

No attempt will be made to assess the number of commentaries in support of and against *The Oregonian*; many of the stories took no clear position. This textual analysis focuses on themes and arguments used by journalists who disagreed with *The Oregonian*, working from the idea that in the journalists' responses can be found underlying ethical and political assumptions that guide their practice. All journalists do not hold these views, but these commentaries reflect commonly held viewpoints. Although all journalists do not take the same position on this issue, when journalists make arguments drawing on common notions about objectivity, as many of these commentaries do, they ignore important critiques and reach questionable conclusions.

The Policy and Journalists' Objections

Oregonian Editor William Hilliard (1992) announced the new policy with this statement:

The Oregonian will immediately discontinue using sports teams' names and nicknames that many Americans feel are offensive to members of racial, religious, or ethnic groups. Initially, this will include references to Redskins, Redmen, Indians, and Braves. Others may be dropped if it becomes evident that they, too, are offensive. I have directed this action with the belief that these names tend to perpetuate stereotypes that damage the dignity and self-respect of many people in our society and that this harm far transcends any innocent entertainment or promotional value these names may have. America is a multi-cultural society and all of us have an absolute right to demand respect from



our fellow citizens. *The Oregonian* is sensitive to the feelings of those in our society who are rightly offended today by names and nicknames that came into being when a majority in this country was insensitive to minority concerns. (p. D-1)

In a column that elaborated on the decision, Managing Editor Pete Thompson (1992) wrote that the paper's editors had decided (a) that the ban was not an infringement of anyone's First Amendment rights, (b) that editorializing on the issue would not have been enough, and (c) that newspapers could not wait for society or the teams to lead the way on this issue. The paper "will not be a passive participant in perpetuating racial or cultural stereotypes in our community," Thompson wrote (p. C9).

Other media outlets have not rushed to imitate *The Oregonian*. A Washington, DC radio station, WTOP, did briefly institute a ban on "Redskins" in March 1992. In response to criticism, the station manager quickly said he would research the issue to determine if the ban was supported by most Native Americans. In November 1992, the station was sold, the manager left, and the ban was officially lifted (Shapiro, 1992; Yorke, 1992).

Most of the journalists who wrote about or commented on the issue agreed that the names were offensive to some and probably should be phased out by the teams. Some commentators, however, argued there was no reason for changing the names and labeled the movement to end the use of Native American images as a misguided attempt to be "politically correct," and unworthy of serious consideration. It was these journalists who most vigorously trivialized the concerns of those who objected to the names. A number of journalists suggested that if the Redskins dropped that name, Scandinavians would have grounds to complain about the "Vikings," Christians about the "Fighting Devils," and animal-rights activists about the "Bears."

These journalists argued that people are becoming too sensitive to the possible offensiveness in language. From this point of view, the offensiveness of Native American nicknames is inherently subjective, and because there is no consensus, no collective decision should be made—"What one person sees as a masterpiece, another sees as a mess," (Moore, 1992, p. B2). Because the larger society should not take action, no action by the newspaper was necessary, they reasoned. These commentaries were more likely to be insulting, suggesting the issue was foolish. For example, one columnist blamed "a couple of fringe American Indian groups" for the trouble and called the paper "loony" (Knott, 1992).

That was, however, a minority view among the commentaries. The more common response to *The Oregonian's* decision by journalists was agreement that the use of Native American names and images for teams was problematic, but concern that the newspaper erred in taking independent action. The journalists who argued that media outlets should stay out of the controversy relied on a variation of the political-correctness argument that was tied directly to journalistic principles about objectivity, neutrality, and detachment from politics: Journalists should shy away from making overtly political decisions that affect the way they cover any story and should not change language because it may offend some readers. Gartner



(1992), who has owned and edited newspapers, made these points in a *USA Today* commentary (Gartner was president of NBC News at the time):

Newspapers are supposed to be mirrors and tribunes and records of society, journals and registers of fact—that's how they got their names. Their news pages are not supposed to be edited to bring about social change. That's dangerous, but it's happening. Increasingly, editors are responding to politically correct thinking, pulling punches with the truth, omitting relevant facts (names of alleged rape victims comes to mind) and views (not quoting purveyors of hate speech) to please "thought police" who want society to conform to their view of right and wrong. . . . Their view is simple: No one should do or say anything that will offend anyone else, especially them. That might be a good policy for dealing with your neighbor, but it's not a good way to edit newspapers. . . . The United States has an independent press for a reason: so the government will not control it, so it can be free to present all sides, all facts, all views. Sometimes, those sides are sickening, those facts are unpleasant, those views are distasteful. But that's what democracy is about. (p. A-11)

These passages summarize the position taken by many of the commentators: Journalists do their job best when they hold up a mirror to the world and let readers see the truth. Sometimes that involves stating truths that are unpleasant or airing opinions with which many disagree. The job of professional editors is to take the heat, both from pressure groups in society and the government, and print those truths in the face of complaints. If editors do that, democracy is served by the free flow of ideas. The consequences of journalists injecting themselves into a controversy such as this one are troubling for Gartner and others. A number of writers have warned of the perils of stepping onto the "slippery slope," suggesting that such "self-censorship" would snowball into greater, though unnamed, incidents of repression. As one writer put it:

The step from a half-name to a half-truth is not a long one. When a newspaper begins using news stories to present a picture of the world as it would like it to be instead of the way it is, it becomes a little less of a newspaper and a little more of a propaganda sheet, no matter how noble its intentions. (Rand, 1992, p. A11)

Politics of News and Naming

All these criticisms of the decision to stop using Native American names and images were grounded in well-established journalistic conventions that are most easily summarized in the term *objectivity*. But as numerous scholars and media critics have pointed out, no decision about news selection, coverage, and language can be wholly objective. One of the central assertions of the critical literature is that news is made, not found, and that journalists are central to that process (e.g., Gitlin, 1980). As Tuchman (1978) puts it in her study of news conventions, "the act of making news is the act of constructing reality rather than a picture of reality" (p. 12).

Such critics show how news decisions are never neutral and always



political, framed by a system of power and based on unstated assumptions about the social, political, and economic order. *Political* in this context does not mean simply partisan, favoring one political party or position over another, but being part of the play of power in society. For example, a business story that accepts uncritically the tenets of capitalism (as most stories in mainstream media do) takes an unstated political stance and is not neutral. The act of constructing reality includes a multitude of political judgments.

Even one's choice of words has these political implications. As Hall (1982) put it, "language and representation involve the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping . . . the more active labour of *making things mean*" (p. 64). The power to name, represent, and define is not a trivial matter. In the case of Native Americans, the past has been rewritten by Euro-Americans to reflect the interests of a White power structure, and the language and images still used to represent Native Americans leave them "hopelessly trapped within the definitional power of the oppressor" (Churchill, 1992, p. 33).

The ethical and political arguments offered here are grounded in the assertion that language helps structure how we know the world, and, therefore, language always has political implications. Analyses of the use of language and images in news media must take into account power systems in which representations are created and circulated.

The Case for Change

From this critical perspective, the case for eliminating sports team names and logos that use Native American names becomes clear. Instead of pretending that the way we name the world is of no importance, we must acknowledge that those team names and images are part of a system that oppresses Native Americans. The best defense of *The Oregonian* policy is an explicitly political one.

We all face questions about naming. A general rule might be that people have a right to choose their own name. A simple example would be the change in terms for Black people; at some point, when opinion in the Black community suggests that African American is the preferred term, the culture should make the switch from *Black* as the generally accepted term, just as society moved from Negro to Black.

But the rule that people have a right to name themselves needs to take into account power, effects, and authenticity; not everyone has the right to claim any name. In the case of the Washington Redskins, a non-Indian group (the team) has exercised its power to use a derogatory name that likely has harmful effects in promoting racist stereotypes—a name to which the team has no authentic claim. The team is appropriating a racist term that has been used against an oppressed group. Control over that name should rest not with a corporation or an owner from the oppressor class, but with Native Americans. If a substantial portion of the Native American population condemns the team's use of that name, the team has an ethical and political responsibility to stop using it.

Media outlets are not exempt from this responsibility. In their claims to objectivity, journalists often suggest that they must let people name them-



selves and use the official name a group gives itself. Again, that rule holds generally, but questions of power, effects, and authenticity must be considered. Hiding behind professional conventions does not erase the ethical and political questions involved. It is useful to look at the journalists' commentaries to elaborate on this position.

First, the debate over this issue often focuses on the question of offensiveness. At the heart of the "PC defense" (the idea that people are becoming too sensitive to unimportant slights, so any charges involving offensive speech can be dismissed as trivial) is the assertion that racist, sexist, or homophobic language is merely offensive, that its most serious problem is that it annoys some people. While common politeness is a virtue, our main concern should not be about offensiveness. We live in a pluralistic society, and it is inevitable that in the clash of cultures, some people will be offended by others.

However, serious ethical and political issues are raised when issues are not only offensive, but oppressive—tied to systems of power in which certain people or groups keep other people subordinated. It should be without debate that Native Americans are an oppressed group, subject to historical and current practices by the dominant culture that have harmful material, psychological, and spiritual effects (Jaimes, 1992). One of the ways in which this oppression is maintained is the cultivation of certain stereotypes about Native Americans, as discussed earlier. Terms such as *Redskin* are part of the construction and maintenance of those stereotypes. Less overtly racist terms, such as *Indians*, are problematic when used by non-Native American groups and combined with stereotypical images and fan practices.

A second defense often made by journalists is that the news media often report on unpleasant and ugly aspects of our society, such as the hateful activities of Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. To stop examining these kinds of events and issues in the press, this argument goes, would hinder people's understanding of the political world and actually slow change by ignoring racism. That contention ignores two key differences. First, contemporary reporting almost always includes material that highlights the deviance of such hate groups. (Deviance is used cautiously here, because of the way in which framing such groups as deviant distracts people from the less overt forms of racism in the culture.) Second, there is a difference between reporting on a racist group and the routine use of a racist team name that goes unchallenged day after day on the sports pages. The reporting about hate groups calls attention to the problem; the use of racist names reinforces the racism inherent in the name. Several journalists suggested that media outlets continue to use the team names but report on the controversy. Yet publications and broadcast stations realistically could not raise the criticisms each time the team name is mentioned. An occasional story about objections to *Redskins* would not counter the constant, unchallenged use of the name in day-to-day coverage.

Other Questions to Address

These two points make a clear case for banning such team names from use by a newspaper or broadcast station. Several less central questions,



however, need to be addressed. The first two concern the general issue of team names, and the third focuses on media.

First: Who decides which names are objectionable? Native Americans are not a monolithic group with one opinion. Indeed, a common complaint of native peoples is that Euro-Americans ignore differences between Native American nations and treat all Native Americans as if they had a common cultural heritage. Clearly, not all Native Americans find the team names problematic, but there need not be a magic percentage of Native Americans who agree on a position before non-Native Americans should take notice. It is clear that a large number of Native Americans object to these team names and logos. While no national survey data exists, the public positions taken by a variety of Native American groups suggest that there is a consensus among native peoples. Although some Native Americans have stated that they find the issue unimportant, few, if any, argue that team names such as Redskins are a source of pride for them. So, in the absence of a strong argument from Native Americans for using the names, these teams should stop using the names. This does not mean that members of the dominant group (Euro-Americans) should unilaterally make decisions about each nickname or image. Control over decisions about naming should be guided by Native Americans—the people who have the most at stake and the most reliable evaluation of the harm involved. There have been, and no doubt will be, cases in which Native Americans strongly support such names for schools that have a large Native American population, but that exception does not undermine this position.

Second: What are the competing interests? The interests of fans and team owners are relevant to, though not controlling over, this ethical and political decision. The former have a stake in the enjoyment of a spectator sport, the latter in whatever enjoyment or self-fulfillment they get from their teams and in profits. In neither case are those interests significant enough to counter the goal of combating oppression. Even for the most nostalgic fan or owner, changing a team name or logo is not a serious harm, and owners do not argue that it will reduce income.

Third: What are the costs, both financial and professional, to the media outlet? To ask writers to avoid a few team names requires nothing more than sending a memo to staff members and monitoring employee compliance. There is no financial burden in the execution of the policy, and the only potential cost would be in lost subscription income if angry readers canceled or lost advertising income if angry advertisers dropped their ads. But even if the decision resulted in lost income, the burden would have to be substantial before justifying the status quo. The other argument against change is that it puts media outlets in a position of being overtly political, which hurts their claim to be a neutral news source, on which their acceptance by readers is said to rest. But as previously argued, the conventions of objectivity are little more than veneer on a news-gathering and reporting process that is inherently political, and acknowledging the politics of news may be in the best interest of journalists. More flippantly, it could be argued that if journalists are the only people left who believe they are objective, the only damage to their reputations would be in their own eyes.



Conclusion

One way to dismiss the entire question of team names is to point out that far greater problems face Native Americans: land rights, economic survival, health risks. Clearly, whether a few teams use derogatory names and symbols is not the only, or most important, item on the agenda of Native Americans. But when the costs of change are so small, there is no credible reason not to change, even if that change is not the single most important issue concerning Native Americans.

Many Native Americans who are active in these many struggles also speak out against the team nicknames. In a critique of sports practices, scholar and Indian rights activist Churchill (1993) asked Americans to understand that the treatment of Native Americans in popular culture is not "amusing" or just "good, clean fun": "Know that it causes real pain and real suffering to real people. Know that it threatens our very survival. And know that this is just as much a crime against humanity as anything the Nazis ever did" (p. 47).

The potential of this issue to expand non-Native American understanding of racism and spur change in other areas also should not be overlooked. As Vernon Bellecourt, an Indian activist and leader of National Coalition Against Racism in Sports and the Media, has told a newspaper columnist, "It's a safe subject. It's something your readers understand. We know that. The trick for us is that once we get the media's attention we need to be able to shift it to other problems, too" (Grow, 1992). Using language in a less oppressive manner does not by itself create a more just world. But it is part of the process, a vehicle for raising consciousness, engaging the moral imagination, and educating people.

Note

1. It is important for me to discuss my racial/ethnic identity and the issues it raises about my conclusions. I am a White descendent of northern Europeans who was raised in the Upper Midwest in areas taken from a number of Native American nations, including the Lakota, Assiniboine-Sioux, and Ojibwe. For most of my youth, I was socialized to accept the anti-Native American racism prevalent in that region. I speak here not as the voice of Native Americans on this issue, but as a White person attempting to responsibly engage in anti-racist scholarship and practice.

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