

The real history of Native American team names

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(Photo: Jerome Miron, USA TODAY Sports)

WASHINGTON — Native American team names mean honor and respect. That's what executives of pro sports clubs often say. History tells a different story.

Kevin Gover punctuates this point with a rueful smile. He is director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian and a citizen of the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. The Capitol dome looms outside the windows of his fifth-floor office as he talks about the historical context of an era when Native American mascots proliferated like wildflowers.

Baseball's Boston Braves adopted their team name in 1912. The Cleveland Indians took theirs in 1915. Scores of high schools and colleges across the country assumed these and other Indian team names in the 1920s and 1930s, even as so-called civilization regulations forbade Native Americans to speak their languages, practice their religions or leave their reservations.

This meant real American Indians could not openly perform ceremonial dance at a time when painted-up pretend ones could prance on sidelines, mocking the religious rituals of what a dominant white culture viewed as a vanishing red one.

Daniel Snyder, owner of Washington's NFL club, said in May that his team and its fans "have always believed our name represents honor, respect and pride." Gover takes profound exception to "Redskins" — a racial slur, he says — but also to the notion of "always." He argues American Indian team names simply did not and could not connote respect in the age when they emerged.

"These were bad times," Gover tells USA TODAY Sports. "It was as bad as Native American life in North America had ever been. The population had collapsed from several million to about 250,000, largely confined to reservations, entirely at the mercy of the federal government."

Washington Redskins should keep name, law professors say in court filing
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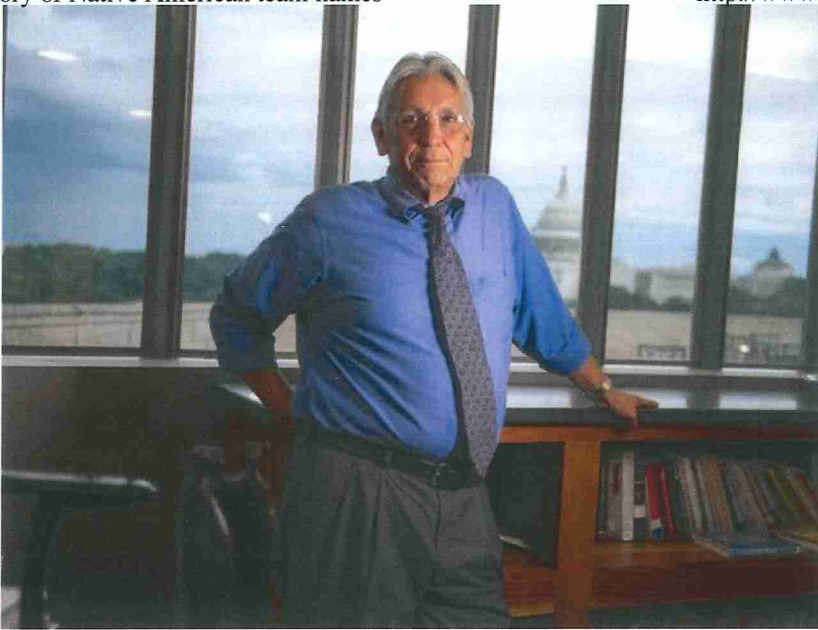
Congress granted the Secretary of the Interior supervision over American Indian affairs in the late 19th Century. The Department of the Interior imposed a series of rules that essentially outlawed Native American culture. The department also created quasi-criminal laws and codes of conduct — offenses and penalties that applied only to American Indians — complete with kangaroo courts and provisional prisons, all of it designed to "civilize" Native Americans.

"They were literally known as 'civilization regulations,'" Gover says, "passed not by Congress but created by bureaucrats and enforced aggressively, and often arbitrarily, by other bureaucrats."

Gover cites an odd case in which Native Americans were charged with adultery, which is not illegal. "And the court actually said that would be true if they weren't Indians," Gover says. "But because they are Indians, they're in a state of tutelage."

Most damning, Native American children were often taken from their families and sent to boarding schools under an assimilation policy that amounted to cultural genocide. Its motto: "Kill the Indian and save the man." Students were told not to speak their languages, even to each other. Their long hair was cut short. They were taught reading, writing, arithmetic and — in a form of state-sponsored religion — Christianity.

"All of this was taking place outside the view of the average American," Gover says. "At that time, someone living in Philadelphia — or, more tellingly, in Cleveland or Boston — might conclude there are no Indians anymore. They are gone. And, in fact, that was the objective of federal policy. ... So there were a lot of very powerful forces at work to deny Native American people of agency over their own identities and their very lives. And that's when the mascots emerged."



Washington, DC -- Kevin Gover, director of the National Museum of the American Indian, poses for a picture in his office on Tuesday, June 21, 2016. (Photo: KC McGinnis, USA TODAY)

Another Supreme Court case?

Native Americans did not object as these team names multiplied — partly because they were in no position to object, partly because collective names such as Indians and Braves did not seem to implicate them.

“Indians didn’t think of themselves as Indians until well into the 20th Century,” Gover says. “They thought of themselves as members of their own individual tribes and nations. So a Lakota had as much in common with a Comanche as he did with a Frenchman, as far as they were concerned.”

Ironically, it was at the boarding schools — where American Indians were sent for detribalizing — that members of varying tribes began to have a common experience in their day-to-day lives. “A pan-Indian identity emerged and became very powerful,” Gover says. “But until that point, Indians didn’t think of each other as alike in any important way.”

Gover, 61, grew up in a 1960s world where the American history taught in schools began in 1492, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Even the word Indians comes from Columbus’s misapprehension that he’d arrived in India.

“I never learned anything at school in Oklahoma that made me proud of my Native American ancestors,” Gover says.

“It is sort of the ongoing descent of this white supremacist version of history that the United States had created for itself that found open expression in the early 20th century. And so the shards of that are very powerful and they were still there when I was in school” — an era when, he says, the word “redskin” was sometimes hurled at him as an epithet.

Gover was in high school in New Hampshire in 1973 when he wrote a letter to the Washington NFL team objecting to its use of a word that had been used to demean him. He didn’t imagine then that he would live and work in Washington someday.

Phillip Gover, his son, is one of the Native American petitioners who is challenging the Washington team’s federal trademark registrations in a long-running court case.

“I think they are very brave and I think they’re right,” Gover says. “But we’ll see if they succeed. The law is a very strange thing. I guess I would say if a dictionary-defined racial slur is OK to trademark, I guess everything is OK to trademark.”

The trademark registration case could well wind up in the Supreme Court, which shares a neighborhood with the National Museum of the American Indian. Gover wryly points to a landmark Supreme Court decision in the 19th century that essentially said American land belongs to its European discoverers, not its original people.

“Courts interpret the law in whatever fashion is most convenient to the majority,” Gover says, “and I think that is a fair interpretation of what the Supreme Court did for the first 150 years of its existence.”

The Supreme Court cited savagery as recently as 1955 in ruling that native land rights were extinguished by conquest. "Every American schoolboy knows that the savage tribes of this continent were deprived of their ancestral ranges by force," wrote Justice Stanley Reed in his majority opinion.

Adopting Indian imagery

Cooperstown, N.Y., home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, is named for James Fenimore Cooper, author of *Last of the Mohicans*. His 1826 novel offers literature's version of a lasting American myth — the noble and ignoble savage.

The idea dates to the first European contact with America's original peoples. The noble savage is athletic and brave and inhabits a mystical bond with nature. The ignoble savage is murderous and amoral and harbors a malevolent nature. Gover figures Washington's NFL club offers versions of both myths, with noble logo and ignoble team name.

"The Indian-in-profile is always a dead giveaway of the noble savage," he says. "And the word 'redskin' is inherently ignoble. So the Washington team manages to mix these myths together."

The majority culture in the late 19th century admired the idealized noble savage even as it despised what it saw as the bloody-minded ignoble one. But it viewed both as savages and thus doomed to disappear as civilization inexorably advanced under the universal law of progress.

Google "End of the Trail" and hundreds of images will emerge of a windblown warrior slumped on his horse, spear pointing flaccidly earthward. Sculptor James Earle Fraser displayed his version at an exposition in San Francisco in 1915, the year that Cleveland's baseball team took the name Indians. The iconic image has been reproduced and re-imagined tens of thousands of times since, even on the cover of a 1971 Beach Boys album.

"The meaning of it is: 'This is the end for Native Americans,'" Gover says. "They no longer have the capacity or the will to fight. There were all these what we could now call memes about the vanishing red man" thanks to federal assimilation policies that would "finish off Native American identity, if not Native American people themselves."

Estimates of native population run as high as 7 million to 10 million before Columbus. By the dawn of the 20th Century — following 400 years of Old World disease, warfare and broken treaties — roughly a quarter-million remained. It was an era when imaginary Indians felt more real in the national imagination than actual Indians.

Dozens of companies adopted these imaginary Indians to sell their products. Cigar store Indians stood sentry at tobacco shops. A stereotypical Indian maiden still found kneeling on cartons of Land O'Lakes butter harkens to 1928. Mutual of Omaha uses an Indian head logo, reminiscent of the one seen in profile on the penny from 1859 to 1909.

The so-called civilization regulations were issued in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and remained in place into the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt's "Indian New Deal" ended them. In 1932, George Preston Marshall named his new NFL team the Boston Braves. He renamed his team "Redskins" a year later and moved them to Washington in 1937.

These days, where Gover lives, that team name is nearly inescapable this time of year through the end of the NFL season.

"I suppose you could say I don't hate it enough that I want to give up my occupation and leave Washington," he says. "On the other hand, it really does make it harder to raise a kid with some sense of self-worth when he sees people like him being devalued. You wouldn't do it to any other racial minority. So why should we have to live with that?"

The Washington Post released a poll in May that said nine of 10 Native Americans are not bothered by the Washington team name. Gover says he doesn't believe that figure. He doesn't doubt the good faith of the poll-takers but believes methodological problems in polling self-identified American Indians make it difficult to know.

"I do think that on the reservations there are a lot of Indians who just don't care," he says. "They have other concerns that are far more pressing. But two-thirds or more don't live on reservations and this is the rare issue where the folks who live on the reservations don't have ownership of the issue.

"If they want to talk about water rights or treaty rights or tribal sovereignty, we are going to line up and march behind them. But on this issue, they are not exposed to this material that those of us who live in these cities are."

'Bad parts taken out'

White men in war paint are as old as the republic. Some of the colonists who tossed highly taxed tea into Boston Harbor in 1773 dressed as Mohawks. The idea, Gover says, was not so much to disguise the protesters as to show them as authentic Americans, wholly different from their British brethren.

"Indians are in the DNA of the United States and were a way to connect a nation of transplants to this place," he says. "Indians are a necessary part of the American identity. So to keep that element alive, in the absence of real Indians, they began to create imaginary Indians."

Philip Deloria, in his 1998 book *Playing Indian*, says this notion of appropriating Indians as a symbol of national identity begins long before the Boston Tea Party and continues into the present day — and Gover cites Indian mascots as a prime example.

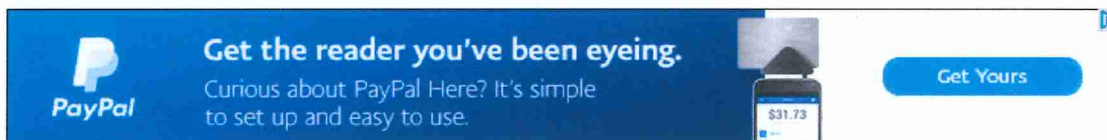
"It is an expression of the idea: 'We, the white people, won — and we can do anything with you and your imagery and your identity that we choose to do,'" Gover says. "And that's a hell of a thing to say to somebody."

Snyder wrote a letter to season-ticket holders in 2013 days after President Obama criticized his club's team name. "We are Redskins Nation," Snyder wrote, "and we owe it to our fans and coaches and players, past and present, to preserve that heritage."

Gover offers an alternative definition that he's heard for that word. "Heritage," he says, "is history with all the bad parts taken out."

Excise genocide, betrayal and broken treaties; substitute pride, nobility and endurance.

"It doesn't feel like an honor when you do not confront the truth of the people you claim to be honoring," Gover says. "They never honor the Native American truth. They are honoring their own notion of heritage, their own non-Indian version of history."



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