The Washington Post

Opinions

I'm dropping my protest of Washington's football team name

By Robert McCartney May 20 at 6:00 AM

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It's humbling to admit it, but Dan Snyder wins.

A Washington Post poll has confirmed that the vast majority of American Indians don't consider the name of Washington's professional football team to be offensive.

Why should this bother me? After all, I'm a longtime, devoted fan of the burgundy and gold. A season ticket holder for more than a decade. Most of my fellow fans will feel relief and vindication that 9 out of 10 Native Americans judge the name to be innocent — just as team owner Snyder and the National Football League have said all along.

But I have also been a proud, outspoken member of the vocal minority of fans denouncing the name as a racial slur. Three years ago, I threw out all my gear — a jacket, shirt and car flag — that displayed the word "Redskins." More important, for two years beginning in February 2013, I used my privileged position as an opinion columnist in The Post's Metro section to press the team to change the name. I wrote 10 pieces on the subject before I gave up my column in early 2015. I try to refrain from using the team name in radio and TV appearances.

I took up the cause largely because every major American Indian organization has resoundingly condemned the team name, going back 40 years. Multiple dictionaries have defined "redskin" as "often offensive" since the 1970s.

I also acted partly out of what I saw as a high-minded desire to support a politically weak ethnic group. It felt like a token of penance for the sufferings imposed on Native Americans over the centuries by the continent's European conquerors and their descendants. One of my direct ancestors was a U.S. soldier who fought the Sioux on the Minnesota frontier in the Dakota War of 1862. The conflict culminated in the mass hanging of 38 Indians in the largest

one-day execution in U.S. history. I don't agonize over this, but it's worth remembering personal connections to an ugly common history.

So it's unsettling to learn now that I vented all that energy and passion on behalf of such a small fraction of the Native American population.

Personally, I remain deeply uncomfortable with the word, which I've long thought to be a racial epithet. The poll suggests that about 1 million Native Americans object to it, and I see no reason to offend them. I won't be buying a jacket emblazoned "Redskins" to replace the one I discarded. I'll continue to avoid saying the word on air.

Still, non-Indian critics like me can't ignore the poll results or pretend they make no difference. Those who have opposed the team name include more than a quarter of Washington-area residents, along with President Obama, Mayor Muriel E. Bowser and 50 Democratic U.S. senators. Many of us thought we were defending a group that needed support. But it feels presumptuous for us to say we know Indians' interests better than they do. We can't argue that 9 out of 10 Indians somehow just don't realize they're being insulted. Some Indians told The Post that they actively support the name, because its use means Native Americans haven't been forgotten.

In light of the new facts, we non-Indian critics should stop pressing the team to change its name. We should drop the cause, even if we privately dislike the moniker. We shouldn't let the name stand in the way of building a new stadium. If we really want to help Indians, we should instead advocate for better schools, job opportunities and social services for them.

I realize this lets down the minority of Native Americans who view the name as a vital problem. These advocates include many tribal leaders, educators, lawyers and journalists. They contend that the Washington team's name perpetuates damaging stereotypes, as do other uses of Native American names and imagery as sports mascots.

But they have been pushing this argument for decades with little impact among the people they say they represent. Nearly three-quarters of Indians in the Post poll said they were "not at all" bothered by the use of Native American imagery in sports. The split between leaders and followers is so great that I don't see how a non-Indian can champion the position backed by a sliver of the community.

I was always aware of that split before, but I drastically underestimated it. I was skeptical of the famous 2004 Annenberg Public Policy Center poll of Native Americans, which found the exact same result as the new Post survey. The Annenberg poll drew criticism for its methodology. It was limited to just one question about the name, amid a series of questions about other topics, and it failed to ask whether the respondent was enrolled in a tribe. It also is 12 years old. Until now, I thought there was a good chance that native opinion had shifted during the recent surge of debate over the name.

I wrote a column in early 2014 urging somebody, please, to conduct a new, authoritative survey. The Post, to its credit, has done so. Our poll posed nine questions, including one about tribal membership. It made sure to reach a representative sample of Indians on reservations where communication can be difficult. The answers were consistent regardless of age, income, education, political affiliation, tribal membership or proximity to reservations.

The poll didn't ask about the team's Indian head logo, but individual Native Americans said in interviews that they liked it. The one thing that really offended them: non-natives donning feather headdresses, painting their faces or otherwise dressing up as Indians. Among other things, that could mock native religious traditions.

I was most surprised by the finding that 4 out of 5 Native Americans said they would not be personally offended if a non-native person called them a "redskin." That suggests that dictionaries should add some kind of caveat in defining the word as a slur. Perhaps the reference books should add a second, non-pejorative definition, with a capital "R": "Redskins: a National Football League franchise based in the Washington, D.C., area." There's a good chance that decades of NFL publicity and millions of dollars of promotion have transformed the word's meaning such that most people, on hearing it, think first of the team.

If so, it's a fresh example of how language evolves. Another lesson may be that political and moral arguments may seem solid one day but flimsy the next.

Meanwhile, Snyder gets to say he told us so. With this distraction behind him, at least for the foreseeable future, he can devote more attention to another priority for this fan: winning a Super Bowl.

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