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Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee

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A brief history of the word "redskin":

Three centuries ago, bounty hunters roamed the continent, collecting rewards for grisly trophies: the skins of native men, women and children. The bounties offered by the French and British colonial governments varied, but in some areas a male Indian's skin was worth roughly the same as a deer's pelt, or buckskin.

This is how the word "buck" came to be applied to Indian men.

As the term "redskin" became popular among the colonists, so did the word "squaw" -- as a synonym for "woman." But "squaw" actually has a very precise meaning in the Algonquian and Iroquoian languages. It means "vagina."

How much of the above is true? All of it, according to the custodians of Native American history.

How much is false? All of it, according to the custodians of white American history. This contradiction is at the center of a legal case that may shake one of Washington's most hallowed institutions to its racist roots -- if, indeed, its roots are racist. It may affect the way Native Americans are viewed everywhere. Then again, maybe it won't. Everything about the case of Harjo v. Pro-Football Inc. is a matter of perception.

The case is being litigated not in lofty judicial chambers, but in the bureaucratic backlog of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. In the lawsuit, Suzan Shown Harjo of Washington and six other nationally prominent American Indians are attempting to cancel the trademarks "Redskins," "Skins" and "Redskinettes," arguing that these terms are "degrading, offensive, scandalous, contemptuous, disreputable, disparaging and racist." Not to mention illegal.

Here's why: In the Lanham Act of 1946, Congress specifically outlawed trademarks that "disparage" any persons, living or dead. Look up "redskin" in the dictionary and the definition is strikingly similar to that of "nigger." Both are slang terms often considered "disparaging and offensive."

For decades, in popular films and literature, the word "redskin" has been preceded by such adjectives as "savage," "bloodthirsty," "heathen," "thieving," "dirty," "drunken" etc. But forget all that, says the trademark holder, Pro-Football Inc., the corporate name for the Washington Redskins: The team that takes the field today, at a stadium named for a great champion of civil rights, exists in tribute to the American Indian. And "Redskins" is a term of honor, celebrating persons of bravery, endurance and strength, recalling a time when great warriors were known to paint their faces before entering fields of battle.

Millions of dollars are at stake in this war over the meaning of a word. If the Redskins lose, they lose the lucrative federal trademark protection of all Indian-related logos and designs associated with the team. Team owner Jack Kent Cooke vows never to voluntarily change the name, and seems quite prepared to go to his grave fighting the case.

But so far, the Indians are winning -- at least at the administrative hearing level, where three trademark judges recently ruled that the challenge should proceed to trial. The judges rejected the Redskins' contention that the team's name and logo are invulnerable under the free-speech provision of the First Amendment. Earlier this

year, the Patent and Trademark Office also sided with Native Americans who protested the National Basketball Association's attempt to reactivate the Sheboygan [Wis.] Redskins trademark for the purpose of selling clothing.

Harjo v. Pro-Football Inc. will be heard sometime next year; it will be appealed, no matter which side wins, to the federal courts.

But this is more than a mere matter of law. No court can possibly adjudicate the accuracy of all the myths, legends and purported facts that cluster around the word "redskin." Both sides cling steadfastly to beliefs that they insist are just as important as documented truths. Both sides brandish the weapons of tradition and pride.

This case isn't just about a football team's name. It's about winners and losers, and playing fair. It lays bare a racial animus as old as this country and offers an opportunity for reconciliation. It is about a collision between free speech and civil rights. In the largest sense, it is about what it means to be an American.

Civilizing the Indian 1904, St. Louis: At a World's Fair ostensibly devoted to the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase, the center of attention is an elaborate "anthropology reservation," where native peoples from around the world are put on display for a gawking citizenry. More than 2,000 Pygmies, Eskimos, Indians and other members of the world's "primitive" populations spend the summer demonstrating their crafts and daily habits.

According to W.J. McGee, the Smithsonian scientist who designed the exhibit, "the physical types chosen were those least removed from the subhuman." The displays are meant to represent the course of human progress from "savagery and barbarism toward enlightenment."

For many exposition visitors, American Indians are already relics of the last century, nearly extinct curiosities, like the buffalo. The Indian wars have been over since 1890; many of the great chiefs -- Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse -- are dead or, like Geronimo, prisoners of war. Indian children must attend U.S. government boarding schools, separated from their tribes and families.

"Civilize the Indian" is the order of the day. In 1904, the U.S. Indian Office bans all "heathenish rites and customs," specifically the activities of "medicine men." Dances and religious ceremonies are punished with jail terms. In the boarding schools, Indian children are forbidden to speak their own languages, or wear native clothing or hairstyles.

At the World's Fair, a 19-year-old student artist works diligently at the federal government's "Indian Education Exhibit." He is making a mural. On the wall of a model boarding school, he fashions the life-size image of a Sioux hunter, kneeling and drawing his bow. The design is made of grains -- rice and red corn color the moccasins.

The young man's name is William Dietz, also called Lone Star. His father was German, his mother Sioux. Tall and well muscled, he is as physically powerful as he is artistically accomplished.

In 1933, he will become the first coach of a professional football team named the Redskins.

'No Indians, No Dogs' Suzan Harjo has a photograph from the summer of 1904. It shows a delegation of Cheyenne leaders posing outside the model schoolhouse at the World's Fair. The two Indians with the most impressive headdresses and forbidding stares are Chief Bull Bear and his son, Chief Thunder Bird. From the window of the schoolhouse, a family of white fairgoers beholds the strange garb and sun-beaten copper skin of the Cheyenne.

Bull Bear and Thunder Bird have been at peace with the United States for many years, since the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, but the federal government still treats them as enemies. They are confined to their reservation in Oklahoma. Thunder Bird's children -- and their children -- will be sent to boarding schools.

Susie Eades, the Cheyenne granddaughter of Thunder Bird, will meet her future husband at Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma. He is a Muskogee named Freeland Douglas, who spent his childhood being beaten with belts and boards at school and escaping to his tribal home 30 miles away, only to be returned by federal agents. Yet Douglas is not outwardly bitter. He is polite, upright, an ardent patriot. In 1939, while still in boarding school, he enlists in the Oklahoma National Guard.

Eventually Douglas is assigned to the 45th Infantry Division, whose symbol is the Thunderbird, and which includes many fellow Indians. In 1943, he is severely wounded in the leg and foot by a German mortar shell near Cassino, Italy. He spends more than a year recovering. His highly decorated company goes on to liberate Dachau.

Back home, Sgt. Douglas and his wife start a family. In 1945, their first child is born. They name her Suzan.

She attends public school in Oklahoma at a time when "No Indians, No Dogs" signs are still common in local establishments. She becomes a writer and activist, marries and takes the name Harjo, which in Muskogean means "Magic in Battle." She becomes a special assistant to the president of the United States.

'Mantel of Shame' Ninety years after her great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were exhibited in a World's Fair zoo, Suzan Harjo shows off an exhibit of her own. "I'd call it a Wall of Shame, but it's actually a Mantel of Shame," she says, gesturing toward the fireplace in her Capitol Hill home.

On display are cheap rubber tomahawks, cardboard headdresses given to whiny kids in restaurants, and pictures of cartoonish sports team mascots, including Chief Illiniwek of the University of Illinois. His image also appears on toilet paper, "which I think is a real honor," Harjo says acidly.

There are products with caricatures of Indians on their labels: Red Man Chewing Tobacco. A bottle of Crazy Horse Malt Liquor. A wrapper from a Chief Crunchy ice cream bar. Indian Spirit air freshener. Stick Um adhesive. Land O Lakes butter.

The beautiful butter maiden is bad?

"It's demeaning to Indian women," says Harjo, director of the Morning Star Institute, a cultural advocacy foundation that she runs from her home. "It's everyone's image of the compliant, helpful Indian maiden whose main job is to save the life of the good-hearted white guy, or to lead them across vast tracts of land to other people's territory." She chuckles. "And to service them in between times."

Harjo is a crusader capable of great torrents of anger and passion, but she keeps a sense of humor and perspective. "It's not so much that each one of these is horrible in and of itself," she says. "The problem is the cumulative effect of this imaging, which suggests that Indians are dead, gone, buried, forgotten. That we are creatures of the past and not quite human."

There aren't enough Indians, she says, to make a politically significant outraged constituency. "You don't see Little Black Sambo around anymore, and you don't see the Frito Bandito. And why? Because people said, 'Enough's enough.' "

Harjo, former director of the National Congress of American Indians and a Carter administration special assistant on Indian affairs, has spent the past 20 years seeking redress for wrongs committed against Native Americans. The walls of her home are crammed with framed copies of legislation she helped get approved; her furniture is slathered with copies of the Federal Register, volumes of treaty law and Bureau of Indian Affairs regulations.

Today, there are fewer than 2 million Indians in the United States. As a minority group, they are practically invisible, unless we read about them getting rich from casino profits or fighting to regain ancestral lands. But the majority of tribes do not run gambling operations or live well: Census figures show that 30 percent of Indians live below the poverty level, more than double the national average.

Since the apex of Indian-rights militancy in the early '70s, various college teams have been persuaded to abandon Indian mascots and names, from the Stanford University Indians (which became the Cardinals) to, more recently, the Marquette University Warriors (which became the Golden Eagles). Harjo is a consultant to public school districts making the transition. But no pro team has done so -- not the Chiefs or the Braves or the Indians -- and the Redskins have rebuffed such requests since 1972.

Even though three big-city newspapers -- the Star Tribune of Minneapolis, the Oregonian of Portland, and the Salt Lake Tribune -- refuse to publish the name of Washington's team, the Redskins hold to the line that it reflects "positive attributes of the American Indian, such as dedication, courage and pride." Last week, through his lawyer, Cooke reiterated that the name is "not pejorative."

"A damn hardhead" is what Colorado Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the only Indian in the Senate, calls Cooke. "An old curmudgeon who just doesn't give a [expletive]," adds George Horse Capture, an official of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York.

Last year Campbell introduced legislation that would force a name change if the Redskins attempted to build a new stadium on federal land. Cooke responded with a dismissive letter citing overwhelming support for the Redskins name in opinion polls. "Public opinion be damned?" Cooke asked.

"If you took a poll on slavery in the South in the 1850s, you'd also find 80 percent support!" fumes Campbell. "That doesn't make slavery morally right."

Earlier this month, presumptive D.C. mayor Marion Barry told reporters, "I don't think we ought to have the name Redskins." Cooke, through his lawyer, claimed he was "not aware" of Barry's comments.

In his hauteur, Cooke is not unlike another extremely wealthy, despotic man who once owned Washington's football team. His name was George Preston Marshall, and he was a stone-cold racist, refusing to employ blacks until forced to do so by the federal government in 1961.

But Indians, they weren't a problem. No, George Marshall didn't mind hiring redskins at all.

Scalp 'em, swamp 'em, we will

Take 'um big score.

Read 'um, weep 'um, touchdown,

We want heap more.

-- From "Hail to the Redskins," written in 1937 by George Marshall's wife, Corinne

1933, Boston: The new Boston Braves football team wants to end its association with the Braves baseball team and move to Fenway Park, where the Red Sox play. It needs a new name. George Marshall, a Washington laundry kingpin, decides on Redskins.

Today, theories abound as to why he picked that particular name, including the notion that it was to honor the Boston Tea Party rebels who dressed as Indians when they dumped tea in the harbor. But according to Marshall's granddaughter and various other accounts, it was to honor coach William "Lone Star" Dietz, the half-German Sioux who is described in a team history book as "a full-blooded Indian."

Dietz was very much the product of two worlds, and of his times. He attended the Carlisle Indian School, a former Army barracks converted into a model "civilizing" institution. It was famous for producing great athletes and "show Indians" to appear in Hollywood movies.

At Carlisle, Dietz studied art and played football alongside the great Jim Thorpe, the Indian hero of the 1912 Olympics. Dietz, a tackle, went on to coach college teams, including Washington State College, which won the first Tournament of Roses game in 1916.

Smithsonian ethnologist John Ewers, who has extensively researched Dietz's past, wrote in a 1977 magazine article:

"The game program featured Coach Dietz as a picturesque split personality. On the left of the page he was pictured in his top hat and tails, carrying a cane. On the right side of the same page he appeared as a Sioux chief attired in a feathered bonnet, beaded and fringed buckskin shirt, leggings and moccasins, with a decorated pipe and tobacco pouch in hand."

At this point in American history, Indians were gaining respect and social entry in a way that blacks would years later: through athletics. Thorpe, a Sauk and Fox Indian, would become, in 1920, the first head of the American Professional Football Association, precursor to the NFL.

But just two years later, Thorpe was having trouble finding a job. So he played for and coached a novelty all-Indian team, the Oorang Indians of Marion, Ohio. Financed by a dog kennel owner named Walter Lingo, the team was nothing more than a publicity stunt, a way for Lingo to promote sales of the Airedale breed.

At halftime, Lingo had Jim Thorpe and his Indians demonstrate tomahawk throwing and perform tricks with the dogs.

The Old White Redskin

Steve M. Hokuf is 84 now, getting around with a cane, living in a retirement home near Cockeysville, Md., but still exercising and able to boast: "I've stayed at 196 pounds, pretty much what I was in college in Nebraska."

Hokuf joined the Boston Redskins as a left end in 1933, the year Lone Star Dietz took over. Was "redskin" a derogatory term back then?

"It was not," insists Hokuf. "For goodness' sakes, we had an Indian coach and three Indian players!"

This is a fact pretty much lost to history. Dietz brought with him three Indian football stars from the Haskell Indian School in Kansas, where he had coached for four years.

The players' names were "Chief" Larry Johnson, Louis "Rabbit" Weller and John Orien Crow. Their hiring completed the Indian motif cultivated by Marshall, who was a consummate showman, the first to organize a team marching band. Marshall, known as "The Big Chief," appeared in headdresses. Hokuf remembers playing in red war paint.

Dietz was fired as the Redskins' coach after a two-season record of 11-11-2. None of the Indian players stayed on. The team moved to Washington in 1937, because Marshall resented low attendance by Boston fans.

Weller and Crow later joined the Bureau of Indian Affairs; both have died. Johnson returned to the Redskins for a season in 1944; he is presumed to have died. But Hokuf believes he can speak for his former teammates:

"The Indians living 60 years ago thought it was an honor to have a football team called the Redskins. Marshall wanted to change the name to the Redskins, so he got an Indian coach, and we didn't think anything about it.

"Everyone just went out and played. The three Indians and Lone Star Dietz went down and got their checks just like we did. And they were good players."

Sixty years later, Steve Hokuf still follows the Redskins in the papers, and says he's aware of the controversy over the name.

"It wouldn't bother me one bit if they changed it," he says with a shrug in his voice. "But I am amazed someone is making a big fuss over it. It has to be some redskins that never lived 60 years ago."

By redskins, he means Indians.

From White to Red "There would not be so much to feare iff ye Red Skins was treated with such mixture of Justice & Authority as they cld understand." -- First documented appearance of the word "redskins," in a colonist's letter, 1699 The first Colonial chroniclers believed that the Indians were actually white. "Their skins are naturally white, but altered from their originals by several dyings of Roots and Barks," wrote Maryland settler George Alsop in 1666.

By the mid-1700s, though, the Indian's "redness" becomes inherent and intractable -- because he's increasingly viewed as a hateful foe more than a helpful ally. The only mention of natives in the Declaration of Independence calls them "merciless Indian savages."

"Logically enough," writes historian Alden Vaughan, " 'redskins' eventually emerged as the epithet for enemies who usually used red paint on the warpath."

Most white historians do not believe, as Suzan Harjo, Sen. Campbell and many other Indians do, that "redskins" originated in the bounty hunting trade. Yes, native scalps and skulls were cashed in by bounty hunters, and "some people did skin Indians and make lampshades and belts and pocket carriers -- but that's just a grisly souvenir, an atrocity," says James Axtell, an expert on Indian-Colonial history who teaches at the College of William and Mary. "Nobody collected bounty skins."

Nor do those historians believe the word "squaw" means "vagina." "It's a non-pejorative word that means woman," insists Axtell.

Yet Harjo learned this from "the clan mothers, the keepers of history" of the Iroquois, she says, and she also heard it from the Cheyenne and the Passamaquoddy and the Penobscot, all of whom speak Algonquian.

In her culture, truth is spoken, not written.

"I was always told never believe anything you read, but read everything you can, to learn the range of the lies," says Harjo.

"Our word's as good as theirs," says Campbell.

But in America, history belongs to the victors. Because the winners are the ones who get to write the history.

Parting of the Ways Indians are among the most diverse minority groups -- more than 300 tribes are recognized in the continental United States -- but many share a common heritage. It goes back to the boarding school era, which began in the 1870s and continued through the 1930s. The federal schools sought to "de-Indianize" the Indians, but in a way they brought all tribes together. They gave Indians a common language: English. They helped create the pan-Indian identity that now empowers Suzan Harjo and her fellow petitioners.

In his public positions, Jack Kent Cooke has made it clear that he believes the Redskins are his property, and therefore he should be free to call them whatever he wishes.

But Harjo seeks another kind of freedom. Freedom from mockery. Indians -- who, after all, were here first -- seem to be the last American minority group that can be safely and openly stereotyped. "In a way," Harjo says, "the maturation of America is all wrapped up in one man."

She means Jack Kent Cooke.

The Lawsuit Harjo v. Pro-Football Inc. has the support of the 180 leaders of tribes belonging to the National Congress of American Indians, the oldest and largest Indian organization. But their view is not universally embraced by Native Americans.

Lloyd One Star is a Sioux who lives in a HUD house on reservation land 14 miles from Rosebud, S.D. He is 38, a hospital custodian with seven children.

One Star says his people have far bigger problems to worry about than name-calling. Alcoholism. Unemployment. Suicide. "I am not prejudiced," he says, "but Indians who have grown up in the city have a different way -- they don't know how the Indians out here on the reservation actually are. If you came here and asked people, they'd say they don't care [about the name]."

He's never heard of the lawsuit filed against the Washington Redskins, but he wishes he'd been consulted. He would be happy to testify -- on behalf of the team.

"If it came down to it, I would have to back up my grandfather," One Star says.

Coach William "Lone Star" Dietz had no children, but he had a brother, Michael One Star. (Somewhere along the line, the name was differently translated.) Technically, Lloyd One Star is Dietz's grandnephew, but as is Indian custom, he calls Dietz his "grandfather."

There are some things about Indian-named sports teams that bother One Star. "It's the mascots -- the big noses and feathers, the beating of the drums, the war whoops. We see that on TV. I see that as mockery."

But it wouldn't surprise One Star if Coach Dietz himself had suggested the name Redskins. "This was a way to be a fierce team. For him to give that name to the team, I can imagine him fighting back in a way," says One Star.

"I could see that he named that team for a reason. So we can go on fighting."

Suzan Shown Harjo did not grow up a city Indian. She grew up on a reservation, poor enough to remember using an outhouse and dreaming about some day affording clothes from the Montgomery Ward catalogue that was left for use as toilet paper. She remembers shooting squirrels for food.

Her father, Freeland Douglas, reenlisted in the Army after Gen. Eisenhower encouraged disabled vets to do so. Douglas spent the next 36 years in military and civilian jobs, obtaining top security clearances, fitting comfortably into the white man's world. As many black Americans before civil rights learned, this was one way to survive.

Douglas never liked the word "redskin," and he never called his fellow Indians that. But whites called Indians an even worse name, he says. He must be prodded to utter it. "Blanket ass," Douglas finally says, quickly apologizing for cursing. That one he despised. It made him into a cartoon Indian.

Like Chief Crunchy. Or the fan in stands, in a headdress, waving a rubber tomahawk.

Their Destiny Suzan Harjo says she is waging this lawsuit on behalf of her two children. It is a matter of destiny. She wants to secure for them a future that contains one fewer slur against Indians. One fewer object on the Mantel of Shame.

"We're going to have this name changed," Harjo says. "Even if it's not done in my lifetime, it is going to be done."

For Jack Kent Cooke, this is also about destiny. Building a new stadium will help ensure that his team remains profitable. If federal or District politicians press the point of the name, he will go where it's not an issue. He wants to pass this team -- these Redskins -- along to his son when he dies.

Changing the name of the Washington Redskins won't really change much. It won't erase the images of Indians that so many Americans carry in their heads: the heathen savages, the noble savages, the handsome brave, the ugly squaw. They've been there for so long, from Tom Mix to Tonto, from Peter Pan to Squanto, that perhaps we don't even notice anymore. But what if some people notice, and object?

Today, some 50 tribes are changing their own names, shedding the colonial labels. The white man named the tribes. The Creek were named because they lived beside a creek. The Sioux, the tribe of Lone Star Dietz, were called "the little snakes" by another tribe, and the French bastardized this into Sioux, a name that connotes "little enemy." Many Sioux are reverting to their original names: the Lakota, the Dakota, the Nakota. They all mean the same thing: "The friendly people."

The Cheyenne, the tribe of Bull Bear and Thunder Bird and Suzan Harjo, also were named by the French. Many Cheyenne now call themselves Tsistsistas, which means "the human beings." It's a noble name. It's a gentle name. No good at all for a football team.