

14 JULY 2020 / WASH FOOTBALL NEW NAME

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It's Today, Explained. I'm Sean Rameswaram. And I'm standing outside RFK Memorial Stadium in Northeast Washington, D.C. It looks kinda like a dying rusty convertible spaceship.

Washington's professional football team hasn't played here since 1996, and on Juneteenth -- just about where I'm standing --there was a big production, because a monument was removed.

It was a tribute to a guy named George Preston Marshall. Marshall is best known for pioneering the halftime show, the fight song, the forward pass, and for being a raging bigot. He bought the Boston Braves football team in 1932. A year later, he changed the team's name to the "Redskins." And in 1937, he moved his team to Washington, D.C. It was the NFL's last team to integrate in 1962 — fifteen after other teams had begun drafting black players. And he acquiesced only after the federal government threatened to kick him out of its federal district.

Just before Marshall's statue was removed a few weeks ago, protestors covered it in red paint. On the sides of it, they scrawled a message: "CHANGE THE NAME." Bit of a Hail Mary, but it appears to have worked.

<CLIP> GOOD MORNING AMERICA: Some major news out of the NFL, Washington's NFL team retiring its controversial nickname.

<CLIP> CNN's JOHN KING: Here's the statement from the team. Dan Snyder and coach Rivera are working closely to develop a new name and design approach that will enhance the standing of our proud, tradition-rich franchise, and inspire our sponsors, fans and community for the next one hundred years.

PAUL: I knew it might be coming, but it's such a shock when it actually happens. Nothing was more immovable in the Mascot discussion than the Washington franchise.

SEAN: Paul Chaat Smith is a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian here in DC and he's going to help us understand the complexities of the fight to change the name of Washington's professional football team.

PAUL: You know, over the past few decades there has been a lot of change with universities and public schools that have changed names so that the mascot movement has been amazingly effective. But the professional sports leagues have always been the hardest, the

most immovable. And of those, the ones that had the most investment in keeping the name as it is, was Washington -- the football team.

SCORING <BUILDING BLOCKS>

<CLIPS> Redskins owner Dan Snyder has held firm under some protest that he will not change the nickname of his team.

<CLIP> Snyder, who bought the franchise in 1999, claiming it honors Native American heritage, even telling USA Today in 2013, quote, we'll never change the name. It's that simple. Never. You can use caps.

PAUL: And that's when there was a lot of attention paid to it. There were more and more people who were recognizing it, you know, as something defamatory.

CLIP> RACHEL SCOTT, GOOD MORNING AMERICA: Many say this team has been behind the times. They were the last NFL team to integrate. They have held onto this controversial name widely seen as racist for 87 years.

PAUL: For a while, many sportswriters around the country wouldn't use the name. This was like 2014. Then it sort of went away. But then, you know, the endgame with this issue was other billionaires and other interests that really pushed it.

<CLIP> FOX BUSINESS: Fedex sent a private letter to the Washington Redskins saying it will remove all its stadium branding and signage unless the football team changes its name. Fedex signed a 27 year, \$205 billion naming rights deal with the Redskins back in 1999, to assume the banner of their stadium.

<CLIP> NBC'S TODAY SHOW: Adweek magazine reporting that investment firms and shareholders worth \$620 billion have requested that Fedex as well as Nike and Pepsi all terminate their ties with the franchise unless owner Daniel Snyder changes the name.

PAUL: But none of that would have happened without this activism that went on for years and years beforehand.

<CLIP> PROTESTER: Let's make our voices loud and heard, and make sure people know exactly who we are. And the REDskins name is not the name of a mascot. It is a racist, derogatory term that I personally take offense to and so do my children. <cheers/fade>

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Tell me a bit about the history of this name. Do you know why it was chosen to begin with?

PAUL: Yeah. You know, we did a lot of research at the museum into this. And, you know, these are names chosen mostly by, you know, really rich white guys. And in the 1930s or 40s there wasn't a great deal of thought or what might happen or what did Native people think. That changed you know, as far back as the 50s and 60s in which people started voice opposition to this. But it's really only been, you know, in the last 20, 30 years that it's begun to register as a significant issue.

SEAN: What did the team say back?

<CLIP> REDSKINS OWNER DAN SNYDER: The name of our team is the name of our team and it represents honor, it represents pride, it represents respect.

PAUL: And in no way is this derogatory or racist. With Washington, the hardest thing is that it actually is a dictionary defined slur.

SEAN: Did it ever cost the team financially in the past 20 or 30 years of controversy?

PAUL: I think mainly what cost them was just not having won a playoff game since 2005.

SEAN: <laughs>

PAUL: I mean, that's ultimately the major thing. People, you know, very few fans choose a team based on the name, you know, fans. You know, you don't say, boy, I would be for the Jaguars, but I just really don't like Jaguars. You know, it's just not how it works. And so this is something D.C. has, the fans never chose the name. But then once you love something, if people from the outside attack it, you know, you're defensive.

SEAN: An argument that Dan Snyder has made from time to time is there are Native American fans of the Washington Redskins who approve of the name. Do you think that argument was overstated or overemployed to defend the name?

PAUL: I think there always have been, and there are today Native people, some of whom who aren't offended, but also some who really support the name. I've met some of them. My question will be, how often on any big policy issue do we ask? Well, how do the whites feel about it? And do all the whites feel the same way about this issue? And you know, the reality is, like any other community, there are not many things all of us agree on. But this is not like some tiny elite of coastal Native people from universities. This is a widespread view that this is something that's hurtful, that's a relic that needs to change.

SEAN: What did it finally take to change this team's name?

PAUL: Well, I've been thinking about that. And actually, it's kind of depressing because you're going to catalog. First of all, this is decades and decades of activists who were yelled at at stadiums and attacked and didn't give up. So. So they deserve most of the credit. But in terms of why it happens now and what it took, it's it's very dismaying. It took a national uprising led by African-Americans in all 50 states. I think I think the pandemic played a role in which some things got more attention because people are at home. And then and then it took something like six hundred billion dollars of corporate and investment money to say, well, time's up. We don't want to support this anymore. And then things changed on a dime.

SEAN: So it took George Floyd's death and protests like this country's never seen for FedEx to feel justified saying, "Yo, the name's gotta go." It feels like it had nothing to do with respect for Native Americans.

PAUL: As far as the endgame, yeah. Indians have less political power in the United States, and economic power, so that these huge advertisers that even before this past year certainly would say they're progressive on racial questions, can ignore it. They did it once it became untenable primarily because of, you know, what happened in this country since Memorial Day. And it really, truly had nothing to do with actual Native people.

SEAN: I want to talk more about how Native American culture is appropriated in the United States after the break, but before we do that, as a Washington sports fan, you got any preferences for a new name for the football team?

SEAN: My two favorites are the Ocelots or the Replacements.

SEAN: The Replacements! There's a Keanu Reeves football movie with the same name, right? Keanu can be the mascot!

PAUL: Everybody likes him.

KEANU REEVES: Excellent! + electric guitar

[MIDROLL]

SEAN: Paul, this isn't just the Washington Football Team, or the Cleveland and Atlanta baseball teams. You curated this great exhibit at the Museum of the American Indian called "Americans" that shows people allllllll the different and complicated ways this country glorifies and co-opts images of Native Americans. And I'll just let people know they can find a version of it online at American Indian dot S I dot edu slash americans.

PAUL: It's a very weird, subversive phenomenon that most folks don't really think about. But Indian imagery has been in the United States popular culture since before the country started, for a really, really long time. So my view is that actually is something profound. It's something where in this very imperfect way, Americans actually went to remember it, acknowledge the fact that the whole country is exist because of dispossession of native people and to try to come to terms with it.

SEAN:—Give us some examples for people who have no idea — who maybe see it but don't even realize they're seeing it.

MUSEUM AMBIENCE

PAUL: When you come into our exhibit, when it opens itself, a pandemic is finally over. You know, you see, for example, a Tomahawk missile

<CLIP TOMAHAWK MISSILE>

PAUL: You see an Indian motorcycle

.<CLIP> SCOUT MOTORCYCLE AD

PAUL: You see a lot of sports memorabilia. And we chose in almost all cases to use children's clothing, you know, onesies, these things like that to talk about how you usually become a fan when you're a kid.

<CLIP> ATLANTA BRAVES TOMAHAWK CHOP

PAUL: You see Elvis in an Indian headdress. And you see tons of advertising and magazine covers. Cher.

<CLIP> CHER SINGS HALF BREED

PAUL: Almost every long running TV show situation comedy sooner or later has an Indian episode. Why? It just makes sense. You know, it's American.

<CLIP> PETER PAN

PAUL: So for most visitors, they come in there and they see things that trigger memories in their own life of watching that TV show or going to a school that had an Indian name. And when you put it all together, it becomes very powerful to see it as opposed to something that's simply trivial. And it's there. And so what if we were the Braves in high school? It doesn't really mean anything, Indian motorcycles are cool. But then when you look at all together, you realize it's

kind of an obsession for Americans to generate this imagery. There's something really spooky and interesting about it.

SEAN: Does it feel like sort of a one sided conversation ultimately that financial institutions, corporate entities, Kanye West on some of his merchandise that I saw on that exhibit, you know, they want to sort of recognize this rich, noble Native American culture, but maybe not spend the time and think about the experience of Native Americans in this country right now? What's the conversation that people should be having, apart from "Yeah, let's change the name of the Washington football team.

PAUL: Yeah, I think that's exactly the right question, and for us, it was about opening up a space where people can see this whole thing is much bigger. And if the phenomenon of these images, you know, it's interesting you brought up Kanye West. There's a Lynyrd Skynyrd poster that has almost the same motif. It's an Indian skull with feathers. And so what do Kanye West and Lynyrd Skynyrd have in common? I guess you could say their politics right now. But I won't say that.

SEAN: <laughs>

PAUL But things that are radically diverse that have nothing in common about the country. You know, motor oil, you know

SEAN: Butter, right? ,

<CLIP> LAND 'O LAKES AD

PAUL: They're just there. So the conversation needs to be okay, is it right or wrong to have the butter maiden on Land O Lakes. OK. That's OK. I'm not. That's a fine conversation. They got rid of it, but it's not like that solves anything. The real issue is why is all this great honoring only happen to us in these particular ways?

SEAN: Yeah, are there other changes you would love to see happen in this country as they relate to Native American appropriation and culture?

PAUL: Well, I guess I've been encouraged. Not something I feel that often. But the kind of news coverage of something like the Supreme Court decision in Oklahoma. or when the president went to Tulsa and in the Black Hills in South Dakota. There's just been a really epic shift in the last 10 years about attention to Native America in a way there wasn't before. So that's really ultimately what we want, is for Native people to be seen as part of contemporary American life. We're certainly drawing a line in the sand as far as a museum. These sports teams should be renamed no Indian, anything, you know. And we'll take positions on those things generally. But what we really want is an American public that feels like this history is part of them because this history is so central to the United States and that's a very long term project. And in terms of the reckoning that people are talking about, it's been really

inspiring to see so many Native people as far as part of Black Lives Matter. It's been really inspiring to see the leadership the tribal governments took in handling the pandemic and making really wise decisions about controlling, you know, the outbreaks on their community. And that's getting attention. So it is...a lot of a lot of good things are actually happening even in this dark time.

SEAN: I'm glad you feel inspired. And if the Washington football team decides to choose The Replacements, maybe, maybe you can accompany me to my first ever NFL game.

PAUL: Consider it a date.

<CLIP> KEANU REEVES: EXCELLENT!

SEAN: We'll get to see Keanu in person at the football game.

PAUL: That would be so cool.