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What's in a name?

This week the Washington Redskins decided to change their name on the grounds it is derogatory to the indigenous peoples of America. This is being followed by calls to change others sports' team names as well, including most recently a call by a Washington Post editor to drop the Texas Rangers name.

But what about our own hometown NFL team?

The forty-niners, of course, were the generation of fortune-seekers who rushed to California in the mid-19th century in search of gold. The upsurge in white population created conflicts with the Indian peoples here that led to a campaign of extermination against them.

In 1848, California was home to about 150,000 Indians. By 1870, only 30,000 were left alive. (For comparison, the entire population of San Francisco in the 1852 state census was just 21,000.) While diseases brought by Europeans had already taken their toll on the indigenous population, it was at the time of the Gold Rush and after that an explicit campaign of extermination was conducted, with the California government dispatching state militia and the U.S. cavalry to kill Indians.

Most of the forty-niners did not strike gold and get rich. So they reverted to farming, often simply seizing land from the Indians and in some cases killing or enslaving them. The California government actively aided this carnage. At least three times California funded militia to kill Indians, to the tune of \$1.5 million (*unadjusted* for inflation). Assemblyman James Ramos, who represents the 40th district and was raised on the San Manuel Indian reservation, points out that “the state paid militias 25 cents per scalp in 1856 to rid the mountains of Indian people. In 1860, the bounty was raised to \$5.”

In his state of the union address, California's first Governor, Peter Burnett, laid out the template by declaring: “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert.” Even as California entered the United States as a “free state,” its leader was blaming fate for his own decision to kill indigenous peoples.

What about the historical figures we honor from this era?

The prestigious university in Palo Alto still bears the name of its founder, even though, as the eighth governor of California, Leland Stanford continued the genocidal policies of his predecessors. He also opposed Chinese immigrants on the explicitly racist grounds they were “an inferior race.”

The line between good and evil, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn reminded us, runs between every human heart. The sins of the distant past are easy to decry; the ones in our own hearts harder to see and root out. What does “everybody accept” right now, that our descendants will feel ashamed of?

No culture can survive if it does not celebrate its own past. How do we do this while acknowledging the grave errors and sins that undeniably also took place? Symbols are communally created and communally shared. The naming of sports teams is right now carrying this larger symbolic battle. Which places ardent sports fans with a conscience in a real dilemma. Personally, I was horrified when I learned the history of California early in the American era (who wouldn't be?); nonetheless, I still feel an emotional attachment to the name of our local football team. Which points to a notable quirk of our human nature: it is easy to tell someone else to change the name of their team or place or take down a monument when you are emotionally detached, but when it is personal, all of a sudden it looks and feels very different.

When is it acceptable to retain a name or monument when the historical record is mixed, and when does the reparation of injustice require a change? Does the name “Forty-Niners” honor a generation that committed unspeakable crimes against a vulnerable population, or does it refer to a pivotal moment of history that defined the life of our city then and far into the future? Such decisions should be made, not in the wake of acts of vandalism perpetrated by bands of aggrieved citizens, but in the context of reasoned debate based on historical accuracy and the weighing of moral principles.

As Stanford historian Richard White wrote in *The Nation*, “the juxtaposition of reconsidering Junípero Serra while glorifying Leland Stanford makes for an odd California moment, even by Palo Alto standards.” He goes on to say, “naming genocidal crimes is important—but as California Indians already know, some are easier to name than others.”

Some are not so easy. That certainly applies to us Forty-Niner fans.

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