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Michael Vick, Robert Byrd, and the Case for Redemption

By Vinay Harpalani

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December 20, 2019

At the 2020 Pro Bowl, former NFL quarterback Michael Vick will be honored as one of the legends captains. Vick's selection has sparked controversy, because in 2007, he was convicted of operating a dog fighting ring. Details about the ring revealed that many dogs were killed by Vick and his associates in extremely cruel fashion. [There have been several petitions, garnering hundreds of thousands of signatures, condemning the NFL and demanding that Vick not be honored.](#)

But his detractors act as if Michael Vick still supports dogfighting. Vick has served his prison sentence, and beyond that, he has sought redemption. He admitted that he was wrong and that dog fighting is a reprehensible activity. Moreover, Vick became quite involved in the effort to eradicate dog fighting. He has spoken out against it, donated money to animal rights organizations, and also advocated for the Animal Fighting Spectator Prohibition Act of 2011. Representative Jim Moran, Co-chair of the Congressional Animal Protection Caucus, even called Vick [“a ‘leader’ in the fight against animal cruelty.”](#) Honoring Michael Vick will be a statement against dogfighting, not for it. Moreover, it will send the message that redemption for wrongdoing is possible and desirable.

[Vick has brought an anti-dog fighting message to an audience who might not otherwise hear it. The membership of most animal rights organizations is, by far, predominantly White.](#) People of color do care about animals, but we tend to prioritize issues that directly affect our communities and to devote our energy to movements like #BlackLivesMatter. But by working with the Humane Society, Michael Vick has added another dimension to the animal rights movement. [He has reached many Black and Brown children who are from communities where dog fighting occurs commonly.](#)

[Vick was one of those children.](#) He was exposed to dog fighting at a young age, and like many youth in all walks of life, he came to accept what he saw as normal. In fact, dog fighting was common in the U.S. through much of the 19th and 20th century: the United Kennel Club was actually founded to organize pedigrees for dog-fighting. Even today, unfortunately, dog fighting is legal in Japan, China, and some other countries. And when Vick was growing up (and during my own lifetime), it was still legal in some U.S. states. So Vick's former behavior has to be viewed in

context. Nevertheless, through his advocacy over the past decade, Vick has probably saved more dogs from dying than he and his associates killed in the past.

There is also a broader historical context to consider here. [America has so many monuments and honors to people who owned slaves, fought for the Confederacy, promoted the oppression and genocide of Native Americans,](#) and committed many other heinous acts. What kind of message does it send to children when we can honor those who enslaved and lynched Black people, but we must shun those who killed dogs--even when they have repented?

Are Black lives are worth less than dogs' lives? Throughout much of American history, White people and others viewed Black people as sub-human. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan existed to terrorize Black people. And as recently as 2010, nine years ago, we had a [U.S. Senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who had previously been a member of the Ku Klux Klan.](#)

Ironically, Senator Byrd was one of Michael Vick's most vocal critics in 2007, when Vick's involvement with dog fighting was exposed. [Byrd famously stated on the Senate floor that he was "confident that the hottest places in hell are reserved for sick and brutal people who hold God's creatures in such brutal and cruel contempt."](#) Those are very strong words, and since Byrd passed away a few years later, we don't know if he would have ever forgiven Michael Vick.

But like Michael Vick, Senator Byrd sought redemption for his own past actions. Many years after he left the KKK, Byrd called his involvement in it "the greatest mistake I ever made." In his [autobiography](#), Senator Byrd reflected:

I was sorely afflicted with tunnel vision—a jejune and immature outlook—seeing only what I wanted to see because I thought the Klan could provide an outlet for my talents and ambitions. ... I know now I was wrong. Intolerance had no place in America. I apologized a thousand times ... and I don't mind apologizing over and over again. I can't erase what happened ... [.]

Senator Byrd recognized that he could never fully make amends for his membership in the KKK, but he was going to try anyway. While he was initially quite hostile to civil rights legislation, Byrd later changed his views. He had filibustered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and opposed the Voting Rights Act of 1965—but for the last three decades of his life, Byrd was one of the Senate's most effective advocates for civil rights. Because he was the longest-serving member of Congress in U.S. history and held many leadership positions along the way, Byrd had a lot of influence on his colleagues. [Hilary O. Shelton, Director of the NAACP Washington Bureau and Senior Vice President for Advocacy and Policy, noted that Byrd "was a master of the Senate Rules, and helped strategize passage of legislation that helped millions of Americans."](#)

Just as Michael Vick was able to reach Black and Brown youth that PETA and the Humane Society could not, Robert Byrd could marshal his influence, knowledge, and his White male privilege to promote civil rights. At the time of his death in 2010, [Byrd had a 100 percent voting record on 33 issues that were deemed critical by the](#)

NAACP—a designation attained by less than 20 percent of Senators. He supported hate crimes legislation and other civil rights bills, and he played a key role in the 2006 reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act—forty years after he had originally opposed the Act. And upon his death, the NAACP called Byrd a champion for civil rights and liberties” and stated that he “came to consistently support the NAACP civil rights agenda.”

We can't know Senator Byrd's motivation. He may have just wanted to improve his historical legacy, or he may have genuinely seen the immense error of his earlier beliefs. It was probably some combination of both. But whatever the case, because he sought redemption and tried to make amends, the nation's leading civil rights organization forgave Senator Byrd and even honored him.

There are many other examples of Black people forgiving heinous acts such as unjustified police shootings and even racist mass murders. The perpetrators of these acts may not always have been deserving: some have not even repented. But Vick has sought redemption and tried to make amends. And just as the NAACP forgave and honored Senator Robert Byrd, we should extend forgiveness and let the NFL honor Michael Vick.

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