CIVIL RIGHTS ON THE GRIDIRON
THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND THE DESEGREGATION OF THE WASHINGTON REDSKINS

By Thomas G. Smith, Associate Professor of History,
Nichols College, Dudley, MA

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"We'll start signing Negroes," Washington Redskins owner George Preston Marshall once quipped, "when the Harlem Globetrotters start signing whites." In 1961 the Redskins were the only team in professional football without a black player. In fact, in the twenty-five year history of the franchise no black had ever played for George Marshall. Sam Lacy, the gifted black sportswriter for the Baltimore Afro-American called the Redskins football's "lone wolf in lily-whiteism." Their owner was "the one operator in the whole structure of major league sports who has openly flouted his distaste for tan athletes."

Elected to office on a pro-civil rights platform and eager to display its commitment to the campaign promise of equal job opportunity, the Kennedy Administration moved to desegregate the Redskins. That action, in the highly visible sports arena, signaled to the nation a more aggressive civil rights policy. On March 24, 1961 Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall warned Marshall to hire black players or face federal retribution. For the first time in history, the federal government had attempted to desegregate a professional sports team. An examination of that effort shows the deep divisions in American society over the struggle for black equality and provides insights into the New Frontier's civil rights program.

Along with George Halas of the Chicago Bears and Art Rooney of the Pittsburgh Steelers, George P. Marshall was one of the founding fathers of the National Football League. Opinionated, flamboyant and contentious, Marshall was also imaginative, shrewd and persuasive. His contributions to the game earned him election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Born in Grafton, West Virginia in 1896, Marshall was raised in Washington, D.C. and always considered that city home. He dropped out of high school to pursue acting, but that career was interrupted by two years of service in World War I. Upon his father's death in 1919, he took, over the family business: the Palace Laundry.

As a businessman, Marshall displayed a knack for promotion through clever advertising. He developed the slogan "Long Live Linen," and once ran a newspaper advertisement which consisted of a blank page except for a few words at the bottom which read: "This space was cleaned by Palace Laundry." By 1946, when he sold-out, he had transformed a small family business into a multi-million dollar chain with fifty-seven stores.

Marshall first became a sports owner in 1926 when he for financed a professional basketball team, the Washington Palace Five. Six years later, he invested in a National Football League team, the Boston Braves. Renamed the Redskins to eliminate confusion with the baseball team, the franchise enjoyed only modest success. In 1936 the team won the division title, but the fans and press showed little enthusiasm. Angered by the lack of support, Marshall moved the team from Boston to Washington in 1937.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s the Redskins were successful on the field and at the gate. Led by quarterback Sammy Baugh, the team won six division titles between 1937 and 1945. In 1940 the Redskins suffered the worst defeat in championship playoff history, losing to the Chicago Bears 73-0. When the gun sounded ending the massacre one reporter cracked: "That's George Marshall shooting himself." After World War II, the Redskins failed to win another title under Marshall. The owner's stubborn refusal to employ black athletes no doubt contributed to the team's poor record. "Thanks to the Marshall Plan," lamented one sportswriter, the Redskins were "the whitest and worst" team in professional football.

Despite his rigid resistance to integration, Marshall was an active owner who brought many innovations. "He took a dull game," wrote one columnist, "and made it irresitible." He proposed splitting the league

into two divisions with a season- ending championship game. He suggested the player draft and roster limitations. He also helped bring several rule changes. One moved the goal posts from the end zone to the goal line to encourage field goal attempts. Another permitted passing from any spot behind the line of scrimmage. Another tapered the ball to facilitate passing. Still another allowed unlimited substitutions. He also proposed an annual all-star game called the Pro-Bowl.

Marshall was a grand showman who promoted football as family entertainment. He introduced the half-time extravaganza because he believed that football was a pageant similar to the "gladiator shows" of ancient Rome. Despite the Great Depression, Marshall organized a 110 piece band and outfitted it with $25,000 worth of burgundy and gold uniforms. His wife, Corinne Griffith Marshall, co-authored a popular fight song, "Hail to the Redskins." And before games, the band played "Dixie." Besides the marching band, halftime shows sometimes featured animal acts, clowns, celebrities from state and screen, symphony orchestras, and, at Christmastime, Santa Claus.

Although he was an innovator, Marshall found some changes in the game distasteful. Besides integration, he opposed a players' union and pension system. He was extremely frugal in terms of travel expenses and salaries. He once berated fellow owner Art Rooney of the Steelers for driving up salaries by signing University of Colorado star Byron "Whizzer" White for $15,800, the highest contract in football in 1938. One sportswriter referred to Marshall as "the last of the small-time spenders."

His coaches found him a difficult boss. In one 17 year span he had 9 head coaches. During games he roamed the sidelines, argued with officials and suggested plays. He once recommended reversing the roles of the offensive and defensive linemen. When coach John Whelchel refused, Marshall told quarterback Sammy Baugh: "Hell, I hired him for a disciplinarian. I didn't hire him for a goddamn coach!" Baugh recalled: "Oh that George was wonderful, goddamn him." Even when the volatile owner watched from his box, he communicated his views to players and coaches. When Vice- President Richard Nixon left the White House in early 1961, he told a friend that he would miss watching games with Marshall. That experience, he said, "was just like going to a double feature movie. His priceless comments made the afternoon fun even when we lost."

Marshall enjoyed the limelight and controversy. At NFL meetings, Halas remembered, Marshall would "rave and rant" in order to win a point. He had long-running feuds with Harry Wismer, a Redskins stockholder who favored integration, and Shirley Povich, a Washington Post sportswriter who he called a "fifth columnist." The Redskins' owner caused a stir among sportsminded Americans when he wrote an article for the Saturday Evening Post proclaiming football the national pastime because baseball was dead. And once on a television show, Oscar Levant asked Marshall if he was anti-Semitic. He responded: "Oh no, I love Jews, especially when they're customers." He went on to say that "No one of intelligence has ever questioned my theories on race or religion."

During the 1920s, the formative years of the National Football League, blacks participated on several teams. Paul Robeson and Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard played for Akron, Fred "Duke" Slater with the Chicago Cardinals, and Jay Mayo "Inky" Williams with the Hammond Pros. During the depression decade and war years, however, blacks were excluded. With the departure of Joe Lillard from the Chicago Cardinals and Ray Kemp from the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1933, another black did not play in the NFL until after World War II.

The racial ban is not easily explained. Certainly there were qualified black athletes. Ozzie Simmons, Homer Davis, Fritz Pollard, Jr., Jerome Holland, Kenny Washington, Marion Motley, and others had all "proved their ability to stand the gaff and grind of the gridiron game." One writer speculated that NFL owners excluded all blacks because one, Joe Lillard, was alleged to have been "a bad actor." It is possible, though not probable, that George Marshall may have persuaded other magnates to follow his discriminatory hiring policies. Marshall was new to the league in 1932, but he had enough influence to initiate several rule changes by mid-decade. But perhaps the best explanation is that football owners decided informally to emulate the policy of racial exclusion that prevailed in major league baseball. By falling into line with the baseball brethren, football titans could avoid the repercussions of hiring blacks while so many depression-era whites were employed.

After World War II, many Americans began to reassess their racial attitudes. Thousands of blacks had joined the armed services to fight totalitarianism abroad. Nearly one million others had moved to northern and western cities to take jobs in war industries. The Cold War, too, helped break down segregation. How could the United States condemn the Soviet Union for civil rights violations when blacks in America were

treated as second class citizens? In 1946 President Harry S. Truman established a committee on civil rights. The next year, that presidential committee issued a report recommending the creation of a permanent federal bureau to insure equal job opportunities and the withholding of federal funds from those states that practiced segregation in public facilities. Those recommendations went unfulfilled due to Southern congressional opposition. In 1948 Truman issued an executive order desegregating the armed services and the Democrats inserted a civil rights plank in their party platform.

In the 1950s Afro-Americans made important strides toward racial equality. In 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously against school segregation in the Brown decision. The following year the court mandated the integration of public schools with "all deliberate speed." In 1955 a Montgomery, Alabama woman, Rosa Parks, lashed out against segregation in public transportation by refusing to yield her bus seat to a white man. And in 1960 four black students took seats in a segregated Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter and refused to leave until they were served. Their action sparked sit-in movements against segregation throughout the South.

Jim Crow also started to give way in professional sports. Baseball, basketball and football all hired black athletes. Although it was done without fanfare, professional football broke the color ban in 1946, the same year the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league baseball contract. The "Jackie Robinsons" of postwar professional football were Kenny Washington and Woody Strode of the Los Angeles Rams and Bill Willis and Marion Motley of the Cleveland Browns.

As in major league baseball, full acceptance of blacks on the gridiron came about slowly. Influenced by the success of the desegregated Cleveland Browns, club owners gradually added black players to their rosters. By 1952 only the Redskins and Detroit Lions had failed to desegre gate. By mid-decade, the Redskins stood alone. During the 1950s a total of 143 blacks played in the NFL. At the close of the 1960 season there were sixty-one blacks on NFL teams. The following year that figure climbed to eighty-three, an average of six per team. Blacks constituted 16.5% of the players in the NFL while only 10.5% of the nation's population was black. Scores of Afro-Americans also played in the rival American Football League. Civil rights activists protested against Marshall's discriminatory hiring policies at NFL meetings and a Redskins' home games at Griffith Stadium. Marshall, however, steadfastly resisted desegregation. For the Redskins' owner, NAACP stood for "Never at Anytime Any Colored Players."

Marshall never fully explained his intransigence. Little is known about his formative years, but his southern origins no doubt contributed to his racism. He once claimed that he did not sign black athletes because white southerners on the team would have balked. That reasoning, however, did not dissuade other owners. Nor did any white players refuse to play with blacks. His desire for profits may have helped shape his position. As the owner of several radio and, later, television stations, he maintained that using black players would drive away advertisers and his white southern audience. Then, too, Washington was a southern city that adhered rigidly to segregation during the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1950s, however, Washington gradually desegregated its schools, movie houses, theaters, churches, playgrounds, swimming pools, bowling alleys, restaurants, hotels, public transportation system, and Constitution Hall. Blacks joined the police and fire departments, the bar association, medical society, and nurses association. Increasingly, blacks were hired by the federal government, and, blacks played for the Washington Senators baseball team.

Despite those strides, racial intolerance and discrimination persisted in the nation's capital. Whites fled to segregated suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. In 1950 whites constituted about 65% of the city's population. Ten years later, whites were a minority of 45%. In 1960, six years after school desegregation, 76% of the public school population was black. Although blacks comprised a majority of the population, the city was governed by an all white council appointed by the President. The police and fire departments had been integrated, but there were few black officers. Similarly, blacks were generally excluded from responsible positions in city government and business. Private clubs, such as the Cosmos, excluded blacks. Washington, then, was not an integrated city in 1960.

Influenced by the civil rights movement and by a woeful 1960 season consisting of one victory, sportswriters and fans assailed the ban on blacks. Sam Lacy in the Afro-American repeatedly blasted Marshall's "lily-white stubbornness." "This column has never advocated suicide," he wrote in frustration, "but in GPM's case, it would be readily forgivable." Pulitzer-winning sports columnist Shirley Povich also took the owner to task. The Redskins' colors, he wrote, were "burgundy, gold and Caucasian." "In modern pro-football," he continued, "Marshall is an anachronism, as out of date as the drop kick." His white supremacist policies, designed to please a predominantly southern radio and television audience,

were a disservice to the players, coaches and fans. Even Dixie rooters, he argued, should realize that "what is important is how the man plays the game not the notation on his birth certificate. "Finally, Gordon Cobbledick, a respected sports columnist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, observed that the Redskins' Jim Crow policy was "spotting their rivals the tremendous advantage of exclusive rights to a whole race containing excellent football players." In the past, the Redskins had bypassed black athletes such as Jimmy Brown, Lenny Moore, Jim Parker, Roosevelt Grier, Roger Brown, and Big Daddy Lipscomb. Drafting blacks, he cautioned, "is not an argument for social equality. It's a matter of practical football policy."

The criticism was fruitless. Marshall sought to improve the team by replacing coach Mike Nixon with Bill McPeak. At the NFL player draft in late December, 1960 the Redskins pursued "state rights football" by shunning blacks. The selected Wake Forest quarterback Norm Snead and nineteen other whites.

Blacks had high expectations when John Kennedy took over the White House in January 1961. As a presidential candidate, he had called for an end to racial discrimination through congressional legislation and strong executive leadership. Blacks supported the Democratic candidate, the Afro-American editorialized, because "we confidently believe that under Mr. Kennedy America will at last come of age, making a reality the long withheld promise of the democratic ideal." Martin Luther King, addressing an Emancipation Day rally in Chat tanooga, Tennessee, pointed out that blacks had helped to elect the President and "we are expecting him to use the whole weight of his office to remove the heavy weight of segregation from our shoulders." Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, he continued, was an executive order. "We must remind Kennedy that when he gets the pen in his hand we expect him to write a little with it."

For some blacks, the field of sports was "still leading the way" toward equality. Sam Lacy and Wendell Smith, a prominent black columnist for the Pittsburgh Courier, denounced segregated housing at baseball spring training camps in Florida. Charlie Sifford became the first black to play in a Professional Golfers' Association tournament. The PGA also removed a whites-only membership clause from its by-laws. Willie O'Ree signed with the Boston Bruins of the National Hockey League. Heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson insisted upon integrated seating in Miami when he signed a contract to fight Ingemar Johansson. And one pioneer, Nathan Boya, dramatically demonstrated his desire for sports integration by becoming the first black to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

As president, Kennedy moved cautiously on civil rights. Instead of pushing legislation, he preferred to combat racial injustice with symbolic gestures and limited executive action. Marian Anderson, the famous black contralto, was invited to perform at the Inauguration. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall resigned their membership in exclusive, white-only clubs such as the Metropolitan. JFK urged unions to avoid hiring bias and advised schools to end segregation. He asked Cabinet members to avoid speaking engagements at segregated functions. He denounced the decision to hold the Civil War Centennial at a segregated hotel in Charleston, South Carolina. And he belatedly authorized the Justice Department to send U.S. marshals to the deep South to protect freedom-riders protesting segregation in interstate travel.

In his first few months in office JFK appointed more than fifty blacks to important positions. To the dismay of blacks, he also named some white supremacists to the federal bench and failed to deliver promptly on a promise to abolish discrimination in federally subsidized housing. In early March, 1961, he issued an executive order creating the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. At approximately the same time, Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall decided to move against the discriminatory hiring policies of the Washington Redskins.

Born in northern Arizona in 1920, Udall was raised by a Mormon family dedicated to public service. After serving in World War II, he obtained a law degree from the University of Arizona. In 1954, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives. Serving three terms, he won respect as a hardworking, able legislator who supported liberal causes -- aid to education, conservation of natural resources, environmental protection, labor reform and civil rights. Udall's commitment to racial equality came during World War II when he noted the irony of fighting to preserve democracy in segregated military units. In 1960 President-elect Kennedy, who had befriended Udall in Congress, named the forty-one year old Democrat Secretary of Interior.

The impetus for the Redskins' desegregation order came from Interior Department lawyers. Early in March, 1961 they informed Udall that the administration might be able "to force Marshall's hand" on the

color ban. They pointed out that he had recently signed a thirty-year lease to play all home games beginning October, 1961 at D.C. Stadium, then under construction. Financed with public funds, the new $24 million stadium was located at Anacosta Flats, part of the National Capital Parks system. As the "residential landlord" of the parks area, the Interior Department could deny use of the stadium to any party practicing discriminatory hiring policies.

Udall seized the opportunity to act. He moved against the Washington "Paleskins," he later wrote, because he "had personal convictions about civil rights and considered it outrageous that the Redskins were the last team in the NFL to have a lily-white policy." He did not discuss his proposed action with JFK beforehand because he "instinctively felt that JFK and RFK would applaud. To me it was the kind of stance that was all on the plus side."

On March 24, 1961 Udall notified Marshall that the Interior Department had approved regulations prohibiting job discrimination by any party contracting to use "any public facility in a park area." Udall went on to say that "there have been persistent allegations that your company practices discrimination in the hiring of its players." Without prejudging the owner, he nonetheless warned him "of the implications of this new regulation – and our view of its import."

At a news conference that same day, Udall explained that the new guidelines were designed to conform with the administration's anti-discrimination policy. "It is certainly our feeling that here in the Nation's Capital, with the marvelous new facility being built on property owned by all the people of the country, that we ought to set the very highest of standards in terms of adhering to the policies of this Administration with regard to treating everyone in this country equally." If Marshall continued his ban on blacks he would be denied the use of D.C. stadium. "I think it is quite plain that if he wants an argument ... he is going to have a moral argument with the President and with the Administration." He advised the headstrong owner to "adjust himself to the situation."

Udall's ultimatum gained nationwide attention. The New York Times and Washington Post featured the story on the front page. Not surprisingly, the black press also gave the story prominent coverage. The Chicago Defender headlined: "REDSKINS TOLD: INTEGRATE OR ELSE."

"I don't know what the hell it's all about," Marshall told reporters. He also attempted to laugh off the incident. "We almost knocked Laos off the front pages," he quipped. "I never realized so many fans were interested in a football team that won only one game." In a brief, defiant letter to Udall, Marshall claimed that he broke no laws and that his "lease was made on that basis." Implying that he would pursue legal action, he informed Udall that he had turned the matter over to his attorneys.

At his office, the pugnacious owner sounded off to reporters. First, he wondered why the government would get involved in such a trifling matter. "I am surprised that with the world on the brink of another war they are worried about whether or not a Negro is going to play for the Redskins." Second, he doubted that "the government had the right to tell the showman how to cast the play." Then he expressed a desire to discuss the issue with the President. "I could handle him with words. I used to be able to handle his old man."

Marshall also raised some pointed questions. Would a black have to appear in every contest and event scheduled at D.C. stadium? Would George Washington University's football team be forced to carry blacks? What about southern colleges that played there? Did Udall also plan to integrate the Army, Navy and Air Force football squads? What about the national theatre, national symphony orchestra, the White House press and photographers corps? Where would the government draw the line?

He also tried to downplay the charge of discrimination against the Redskins. "All the other teams we play have Negroes; does it matter which team has the Negroes?" The Redskins lacked blacks because they recruited players from segregated southern colleges. Recruiting southern white players was not a matter of prejudice, he declared, but a business decision. As the owner of several radio and television stations, he did not want to offend his southern white audience by playing blacks. Although he had never signed a black, he had in the past hired athletes who were Samoan, Hawaiian, American Indian, and Cuban. He was color blind when it came to selling tickets and he frequently hired blacks to do custodial and other menial tasks. As for Udall's ultimatum, Marshall said that the NFL draft was over and his player roster was frozen. Leaving room to maneuver, however, he claimed that he was always open to the possibility of adding "players of recognized ability."

The next day Redskins' attorneys attempted to soften some of Marshall's statements. The Redskins, they asserted, had no intention of defying the federal government or breaking any laws. The team would cooperate in seeking a workable compromise.

Udall kept up the pressure. At a press conference on March 28 he gave the Redskins a deadline for compliance. To avoid cancellation of the lease and possible criminal prosecution, the owner must comply with the administration's anti-discrimination policy by October 1, the date of the Redskins' first home game. Marshall could best show compliance by hiring a black player. Udall suggested the possibility of a trade. In a final dig, he said that with a black player, Marshall's team "might win a few games."

In July, Udall again warned Marshall to lift the ban on blacks or else lose the right to play at D.C. Stadium. "This guy's making a big mistake if he thinks our department merely is trying to get some publicity out of this thing. We're quite serious." Marshall considered Udall's statement "rather vague." Disillusioned with the administration, he told a reporter that "you can't tell what will happen under the guise of liberalism." Still, he planned to obey the law even if it meant hiring "Eskimos or Chinese or Mongolians."

Public reaction to forced desegregation reflected the deep divisions over civil rights in the 1960s. Outright racists, such as the American Nazi Party, paraded outside D.C. stadium with swastika emblazoned signs reading "America Awake" and "Keep Redskins White!" A man from Tennessee believed America was headed for dictatorship "when a football owner is forced to put a nigger on his team." Another disgruntled correspondent told Udall that if race, instead of ability, was used as a criterion for team membership then the game and society would be doomed "to mediocrity and eclipse!"

Other Americans downplayed the existence of discrimination. After all, they argued, blacks had plenty of opportunity to play for teams other than the Redskins. Some citizens wondered why blacks would want to play for a team that did not want them. Other opponents feared a snowball effect. Once the administration forced the Redskins to employ a black, would it then require the team to hire other nationalities? One critic observed that the Redskins had "no Puerto Ricans, no Christian Scientists, no members of the Raritan Club, and no Pythians. Heavens, Mr. Udall, these people are being discriminated against." Marshall himself took this approach. "Why Negroes particularly," he asked? "Why not make us hire a player from any other race?" In fact, Marshall continued, why not a woman? "Of course we have had players who played like girls, but never an actual girl player."

Some Americans interpreted the desegregation order as an unwarranted intrusion by big government which threatened democracy and free enterprise. An "aggrieved Redskin fan" asked Attorney General Robert Kennedy to halt "the harassment of private businessmen" by the "cowboy in the New Frontier rodeo." Republican Congressman H.R. Gross of Iowa accused Udall of trying to manage a football team. "If Mr. Marshall doesn't want Negro players on his team that's his business," declared the Tulsa World. For some conservatives federal interference in professional sports smacked of communism. "It's done in Russia, and as the Olympic Games' results attest, with some success," noted sports columnist Doc Greene. Another critic believed that in the near future "the authoritarian official will be telling the American worker where he must work." And a Cold War-conscious citizen feared that it would somehow make the nation susceptible to a take-over by Premier Khrushchev. "Once government sticks its icky fingers into free business, there is a hole in the line big enough for Mr. K to smash through and rack up a winning score for his team."

Despite some intense criticism, Udall refused to back down. The President supported his position as did Attorney General Kennedy and Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg. A long-time fan, Goldberg announced that he would boycott all Redskins games because their hiring policies were "an outrage and a disgrace." Democratic Congressman Denis Chavez of New Mexico also applauded Udall's order. To those who feared that he would become a "Commissar of Sports," Udall pointed out that he was concerned only with Marshall's hiring policies. Indeed, his focus on Marshall gave credence to the charge that he was following a double standard. Georgetown University's segregated team was allowed to use the stadium on the spacious grounds that it used amateur not professional athletes. Udall did put his own house in order. Learning that only 1 of 474 National Park Rangers was black, he moved promptly to improve that "disgraceful record" by recruiting 50 minority candidates.

Perhaps fearful of jeopardizing gains already achieved, black players generally withheld comment. On one occasion, however, Chicago Cardinal running back Ollie Matson admitted that blacks "try a little harder when we play the Washington team." The much admired Jackie Robinson, who had toppled

baseball's color ban, called Udall's position "inspirational and encouraging." Marshall's racial policy, he insisted, "has no place in sports or in our American way of life."

In the spring and summer of 1961 members of the NAACP and CORE picketed Marshall's home, D.C. Stadium, and the Redskins' exhibition games in the west and south. Many sports owners also supported the government's position. Bill Veeck, maverick owner of the Chicago White Sox baseball team, recommended threatening Marshall with the possibility of having an integrated AFL team play in Washington. William Shea and Jack Kent Cooke, members of the Redskins' Board of Directors, urged Marshall to yield. Edward B. Williams, who would become a stockholder in 1962, recalled Marshall saying "that under no circumstances would he change" his racial policy. Football owners, who had recently signed a lucrative television contract and dreaded the bad publicity of Marshall's intransigence, asked Commissioner Pete Rozelle to mediate the conflict.

Initially, Rozelle labeled the controversy "strictly a club problem" and refused to intervene. Udall informed him that the government would not back down. And other owners were embarrassed by the bad publicity. In August Rozelle met with Marshall and persuaded him to relent. Following that meeting, Marshall announced that his team had "no policy against the hiring of football players because of their race." In fact, he had prepared a list of five black players whom he planned to select, if they were available, at the annual NFL draft in December. Running backs Ernie Davis of Syracuse University and Larry Ferguson of Iowa headed the list.

Marshall's conciliatory statement prompted a concession by Udall. He would permit the Redskins to field an all-white team at D.C. stadium in 1961 if they agreed to place a black player on their roster the following year. Udall made it clear, however, that he was not backing down on his commitment to civil rights. "The Kennedy administration," he asserted, " is determined that every American should have a full and equal opportunity to utilize his or her talents in the classroom, in industry, on the playing field and in all areas of our national life." Still, some blacks suspected "a clever diversionary tactic" by Marshall and believed that "the Administration should have held to its requirement of compliance" for 1961.

Others, embittered by Marshall's quarter-century color ban, advised drafted black athletes to shun the Redskins. Sam Lacy ridiculed that position, arguing that civil rights activists had "dramatized under threat of the clenched fist and the Dixie jail, the importance of sacrifice for the sake of justice." If drafted, a black player would have a "moral obligation" to sign with the Redskins. "The principle here is bigger than the individual," Lacy continued. "Suppose Jackie Robinson had taken the position that, since it was a known fact that baseball didn't want him or his kind, back in 1946, he could do without it. Where would we be?"

For the Redskins, the 1961 season was a nightmare. Blacks boycotted games and picketed the stadium with signs reading: "PEOPLE WHO CAN'T PLAY TOGETHER, CAN'T LIVE TOGETHER." Udall and other Cabinet officials honored the pickets. President Kennedy refused an invitation to attend the opening game at the new stadium. The new facility was attractive, but ticket prices were the highest in the NFL and attendance was modest. Worst of all, the Redskins' record was "unsullied by victory" until the final game of the year. Counting the previous season, the team of "Nordic supremacy" went 17 straight games without a win.

Fans and writers heaped abuse upon Marshall and his coaches. "The Redskins end zone has frequently been integrated by Negro players," Povich wrote, "but never their lineup." Although some fans continued to defend Marshall's right to exclude blacks, others believed that Afro-American players, especially a fleet running back, would improve the team. As the NFL draft approached, Udall gave Marshall a final warning. The draft, he declared, "is the showdown on this" and he expected Marshall to keep his promises made earlier in the year.

With its abysmal record, the Redskins had the first pick on December 4. They selected Ernie Davis, the first black to win the Heisman Trophy. Two days before, the Buffalo Bills of the AFL had also drafted Davis and there was some doubt as to whether Marshall would offer enough money to sign him. For their second pick, the Redskins chose another black halfback, Joe Hernandez from the University of Arizona, Udall's alma mater. They also took Ron Hatcher, a black fullback from Michigan State, in the eighth round.

In an enviable position, Davis awaited offers. He had little desire to be a Jackie Robinson, but he did not rule out playing for the Redskins. In early December he met President Kennedy in New York, but when JFK asked about his plans he would not commit himself. Meanwhile in Washington, Ron Hatcher became

the first black football player to sign a contract with the Redskins. When photographers at the signing asked Marshall to pose with the athlete he refused saying he did not wish to "exploit" the situation.

In mid-December, Marshall divulged that on the day of the NFL draft he had secretly traded the rights to Davis to the Cleveland Browns. The Browns, who wanted Davis to join the league's leading rusher, Jimmy Brown, in their backfield, gave the Redskins two black players, Bobby Mitchell, an established running back, and Leroy Jackson, a number one draft choice. Several weeks later, the Redskins added another experienced Afro-American athlete when they acquired offensive guard John Nisby from the Pittsburgh Steelers. Stricken with leukemia in the summer of 1962, Ernie Davis would never play an NFL game. As for the Redskins' players, Hernandez never signed a contract, Hatcher and Jackson rarely played, but Nisby and Mitchell became stars.

Redskins' fans generally cheered the acquisition of Mitchell as the speedy offensive weapon so badly needed. He had performed especially well against the Redskins. In the past season he had scored three long touchdowns against the Redskins in Cleveland. In one game in 1959 he gained 232 yards rushing on only 14 carries. Redskins' players were also pleased to obtain the experienced veterans. Quarterback Norm Snead recalled that the players, virtually to a man, considered the color barrier "ridiculous." Mitchell and Nisby, he remembered, were talented players and "great human beings" who were "received enthusiastically and with open arms." Nisby recalled that on one occasion a group went to a Virginia nightclub. When the black players were refused admittance, their white teammates left.

Aware of the Redskins' discriminatory policy, both Mitchell and Nisby approached their new team with some apprehension. "I honestly feel good about coming to the Redskins," Mitchell told reporters at the time. Later he described the move as being "traumatic" because he had to endure "verbal abuse" and "a great deal of racial discrimination from the fans and the Washington community."

Although he was a pioneer of sorts, Mitchell downplayed comparisons with Jackie Robinson. "I wasn't quite as tough as Jackie," he declared. The racial slurs "affected me greatly -- and I haven't forgotten them." Less sensitive, Nisby found "little difference playing with the Redskins and playing with the Steelers."

Both men differed in their views of George Marshall. Mitchell recalled being treated well by the owner. Marshall was "a nice man" who "never came across to me as a bigot or showed any behavior in that manner." Nisby was less charitable. “I never appreciated the man at all, because of the stand that he took on blacks prior to my arrival here. My relationship with the front office wasn't really that great."

With the addition of Mitchell and Nisby, the Redskins approached the 1962 season with cautious optimism. Both players distinguished themselves. In the first game at Dallas, which ended in a tie, Mitchell ran back a kick off for a 92-yard touchdown and scored on two passes from Snead. In the second game at Cleveland, he caught a 50-yard pass in the final minutes to upset the Browns, 17-16.

The Redskins' first home game was against the St. Louis Cardinals, Udall accepted Marshall's invitation to be a special guest. Once again, Snead and Mitchell, the city's "greatest battery since Walter Johnson and Gabby Street," brought the team victory. Mitchell caught touchdown passes of 40 and 23 yards. After Mitchell's first score, Udall recalled the remarks of a foghorn-voiced black man seated behind him: "Thank God for Mr. Udall."

The Redskins ended the season with their best record in years, five victories, seven losses, and two ties. Mitchell led the league with 11 touchdowns, and caught 72 passes to earn selection to the Pro-Bowl. He had several distinguished seasons and later was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Today he is the Assistant General Manager of the Redskins. Nisby had three successful seasons with the Redskins and then was released. In 1963 George Marshall suffered a debilitating stroke and turned over control of the team to Edward B. Williams and Jack Kent Cooke. Marshall died in 1969. In his will, he left a sizable bequest to establish a foundation, named in his honor, to help improve the lives of disadvantaged youngsters of all races who resided in the Washington D.C. area.

Successful desegregation of the Redskins won praise for the Kennedy Administration. Sportswriters dubbed Udall "coach of the year" and the "most valuable player" in the NFL. Herblock congratulated him for the Redskins' scalp and commemorated the event in a cartoon. Other writers, losing their perspective, called the desegregation of the Redskins an achievement comparable to James Meredith's successful efforts to enroll at the University of Mississippi. "The integration success story of the Kennedy

administration," wrote Boston Globe columnist Wilfrid Rodgers, "didn't take place in Mississippi but here in the back yard of the nation's capital."

Equating the desegregation of a professional football team with the integration of southern schools and universities is extravagant. Indeed, many critics have assailed the New Frontier for its lack of vigor in the pursuit of civil rights. "When it comes to civil rights," wrote the Afro-American in January, 1962, "the bold profile of courage displayed as a candidate has been concealed by the shameful shadow of appeasement embraced as President."

Political cartoonist Thomas Stockett displayed space progress outdistancing race progress. Assessing JFK's civil rights record black leader F.L. Shuttlesworth wrote that "where so little has been done for so long, any little may appear to be large." And Kenneth Keating, a Republican Senator from New York, called the action against the Redskins a clever subterfuge to distinguish the administration's feeble civil rights record. "I cannot help but feel that Governor Faubus and his cohorts need a little more attention than George Preston Marshall and Company," declaring Keating. "The Redskins may be tough on a football field, but the administration apparently has decided that they are easy targets in the political arena."

The administration's move against the Redskins, however, was more than a political ploy and civil rights tokenism. During the early months of 1961, blacks hailed the desegregation of the Redskins as part of the administration's overall commitment to fight racial discrimination through strong executive action. The magazine Ebony listed the desegregation of the Redskins as one of many civil rights achievements of 1961. More progress toward racial equality was made in 1961, the magazine declared, "than any other year in the last decade." The Chicago Defender praised Kennedy for "opening a New Frontier of human dignity." And the Afro-American gave special thanks to Udall. "Of all the New Frontiersman, none has been more forthright and determined to change the racial status quo."

Kennedy, to be sure, was not fully committed to civil rights. He reneged on campaign promises for fear of alienating white southern congressmen. Foreign policy also took precedence over civil rights. Yet, unlike the Eisenhower Administration, the New Frontier took positive steps to combat racial injustice. One of those modest successes was the desegregation of a professional football team in the nation's capital.