

BNPower:

BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

A set of multimedia tools that explore why some ideas take root while others disappear.

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Indigenous victories: What decades-long endeavors to create inclusive policies and stories can tell us about narrative power

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Narrative power often feels abstract because the social change it produces can take years — even decades — and the path toward progress is rarely linear. However, several recent, groundbreaking victories among Indigenous rights groups show that long-term narrative power-building and persistence can yield major advances in equity and inclusion.

For example, Native Americans protested the [Keystone XL pipeline expansion](#) for more than a decade before they [won](#) the health and civil rights battle — a monumental success that involved numerous lawsuits and spanned three presidential administrations. Similarly, 12 years passed between the first proposed idea for honoring Indigenous Peoples Day and South Dakota’s decision to swap out Columbus Day for the new designation, and the holiday did not [gain federal recognition](#) for an additional 32 years, in 2021.

In yet another example of endurance, it took more than 50 years after the National Congress of American Indians launched a campaign to address offensive stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in the media before the Washington Football Team [announced](#) it would drop its R-word moniker, change its mascot, and ban fans from showing up to games wearing Native American-inspired headdresses or face paint. The web of narrative power and infrastructure that underlies each of these victories is complex, but looking at them together can help bring the kaleidoscope into focus. Whether the issue at hand relates to a policy (e.g. land and water rights), cultural visibility (such as national celebrations), overt prejudice (through language and symbols) or something else, progress requires sustained attention across multiple spheres; it means changing laws and policies to shape people’s actions; shifting how people think and talk about an issue; and making sure an issue is visible in the first place.

Power-building also entails using prior successes to buoy future ones. For instance, the campaign that led to the Washington Football franchise name change was not a stand-alone win. Rather, it gained momentum from [previous victories](#), such as the Portland Oregonian’s 1992 decision to no longer use the R-word; a 2002 resolution among dozens of Minnesota colleges and universities against the use of discriminatory names, logos, and mascots; and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s 2014 decision to deny a company’s request to trademark and sell snacks using the R-word.

The power to define what’s true, to determine the story of the past and institutionalize ideas so they replicate, this is narrative power.

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Besides battling stereotypes, Native American activists have faced many hurdles of exclusion and omission; however, that is beginning to change. Not only are athletic teams, educational institutions, and news outlets rethinking their language regarding Indigenous culture, but entertainment media are finally increasing Native American representation. In 2021, for example, four young Native actors became central characters in a show called *Reservation Dogs*. This is a major milestone, considering **fewer than 1%** of primetime TV and film characters are Native American. What's more, the comedy program's directors and writers are all Indigenous.

"Indigenous people are involved at every level," [Smithsonian Magazine reported](#). "It's a genuine, one-of-a-kind breakthrough."

This kind of show, which features authentic storytelling, will no doubt strengthen the infrastructure that supports **broader narrative and social change**. And, when combined with other victories, it reveals the many facets of power that function together, as seeds of change, to advance a vision for society that includes, honors, and celebrates Native American values, contributions, and culture.