It’s no secret that American society is a bit obsessed with the idea of being politically correct. We have unwritten rules about what we can and can’t say almost to the point of ridiculousness, and at times we feel stifled by euphemisms. At one time or another, we’ve all been ready to throw up our arms in defeat, and point out that words are just words. But, occasionally we’re given an important reminder is, at the very least, a necessary evil.

Take for example the new intramural basketball team formed at the University of Northern Colorado: the Fighting Whites. The team’s mascot is a stereotypical white businessman, straight out of the 1950s, and their merchandise sports the slogan “Every thang’s gonna be all white.” Sound offensive? Of course it does. That’s the point.

The Fighting Whites basketball team was formed in February by a group of Native Americans in response to a local high school’s Fyttin’ Reds. The small, rural school employs an Indian mascot, much like those employed by professional sports teams like the Washington Redskins and the Kansas City Chiefs. Solomon Little Owl explained the purpose of the Fighting Whites, stating that the intramural team aims “to make people understand what it’s like to be on the other side of the fence.” If people get offended by it, then they know how we feel, and we’ve made our point” (Rocky Mountain News).

The most obvious offense committed by sports teams is typified by the Redskins, as their team name legitimizes a racial slur in a public forum. Even teams who steer away from racial slurs use Indian mascots that many find offensive, however.

The Cleveland Indians provide one example. While their Cleveland Wahoo is supposed to honor Louis Sockalexis, a Native American player for the Cleveland “Spiders” in 1897-1899, many still object to its usage. The very act of making a Native American team mascot is demeaning and dehumanizing. It reduces an ethnic minority to a caricature, treating the individuals not as people, but as lucky charms. It seems that Cleveland could have found a far better way to honor Sockalexis if that was the organization’s intention. After all, not many of us like to be summed up entirely by our ethnicity. It’s kind of like honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. by calling a team the Little Rock Blacks. It’s hardly an honor at all.

The use of Indian imagery in sports is unsettling because it points to a bigoted perspective on the part of American culture. Sports teams are given names to imply that they are ruthless, resulting in the predomiance of animal imagery in professional, college, and high school leagues. In lumping Native Americans in with other mascots, the sports arena perpetuates the stereotype of Indians as tomahawk-wielding savages. As the Fighting Whites remind us, our cultural sensitivity should extend to all populations, not just to the most prominent ones. We must remember what it’s like to be on the other side of the fence.

On the weekend of Mar. 9-10, the people of Zimbabwe went to the polls to participate in one of Africa’s most important elections in recent history. Thousands waited for up to seven hours to cast their ballots, many of whom sought to oust President Robert Mugabe, the only ruler Zimbabwe has had in its 22-year history. Once regarded as one of the most promising African leaders, Mugabe has in recent years resorted to increasingly dictatorial measures to retain power. So maybe it is no surprise that many would-be voters were met not with ballot boxes but with tear gas and riot police.

Polling stations were closed, and authorities dispersed crowds that had traveled and waited to have their voices heard. The Financial Times reported on Mar. 16 that western election monitors dismissed the results of the election, which Mugabe claims to have won, as being “neither fair nor free.”

Once recognized as one of the most promising African countries, Zimbabwe has of late been plagued with severe economic and agricultural problems. Land reform has been a divisive issue, and poor crop performance has led to widespread hunger. Opposition to Mugabe’s rule began mounting several years ago, ever since the president’s apparent inability to alleviate the conditions of his country.

Morgan Tsvangirai turned this dissatisfaction into the most significant challenge to the president ever mounted against Mugabe and his political party. Voters this month turned out in record numbers to have their say in the future of their country, but many were never given the opportunity.

Given Mugabe’s democratic record, maybe allegations of ballot-rigging and voter intimidation should not come as a surprise. Shocking? Perhaps not. Appalling? Absolutely. President George W. Bush and Britain’s prime minister Tony Blair were quick to refuse recognition of Mugabe’s fourth term. For democratic, industrial nations far removed from southern Africa, these decisions were not hard to make. South African president Thabo Mbeki, on the other hand, is as close as any foreign leader can be to the turmoil in Zimbabwe, and should be applauded for his vote in favor of suspending Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth.

Mbeki broke from the ranks of African leaders who have recognized Mugabe as the rightful winner of the election by casting a vote to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, an organization comprised largely of former British possessions, for one year. Unlike President Bush or prime minister Blair, Mbeki had a tough choice to make. The poor living conditions in Zimbabwe threaten to develop into a social crisis that will spill over its borders, and continued civil strife as a result of the contested election could inundate South Africa with refugees. Clearly Mbeki stands to benefit from a swift resolution of the election dispute, but despite of this he has admirably chosen to condemn that actions of Mugabe’s party.

Zimbabwe’s one-year suspension from the Commonwealth is considered to be a stiff penalty on the spectrum of possible sanctions. By voting for a harsh sentence, and not simply recognizing Mugabe’s fourth term for the sake of a speedy restoration of order, Mbeki has indicated that justice and democracy are still valued.