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A New Culture War: Politics, Race, Rights, & the NFL

Melissa Butler, Moderator

In Inquiring Minds, we've occasionally taken up issues about freedom of expression—especially on college campuses. In recent weeks, the airwaves, newspapers, internet and the presidential twitter feed have been full of discussion about NFL players, in a protest begun last season by Colin Kaepernick, “taking a knee” during the playing of the national anthem. *What's this about?* Is it about politics? Is it about principle? Is it about protest? Is it about money? Is it about rights? Is it about patriotism? Is it about race? Is it about distraction?

The following pages contain excerpts from three [lengthy] articles, one written after Donald Trump weighed in on the matter in a campaign rally in Alabama, and the other two written shortly before the beginning of the 2017 season.

1) Domenico Montanard, “Trump, the NFL and the Powder Keg History of Race, Sports, and Politics, *NPR* 9/25/17.

Sunday was a historic day for the intersection of sports and politics.

Widespread protests in the National Football League, the most popular professional sport in America, were shown on broadcast channels across the country. Stick to sports? Not this week. Whether sports fans wanted to see it or not, they couldn't avoid politics.

Athletes — mostly black — from every team in the country knelt, stood arm in arm, sat or refused to take the field for the national anthem. They even took it abroad with the first protest taking place in England, in a game that represents the NFL's effort to broaden the league's appeal.

And it's all because of President Trump.

"Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now'? 'He's fired!' Trump said at a political rally in Alabama, referring to NFL players who have knelt or sat in protest of social injustices, particularly in communities of color, as the national anthem has played.

Former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick was the first to make the controversial statement last year, before Trump's election, over police violence in black communities. The practice seemed to be fading in the NFL — until Trump weighed in.

Trump has given it new life. It has become about freedom of speech — and something of a galvanizing anti-Trump protest.

The Alabama crowd ate it up. Trump was there to promote his preferred candidate, Luther Strange, in the Alabama Republican primary ...

Trump's continued focus on the issue — 15 tweets between Saturday and Monday morning — could very well help his preferred candidate in the short term. It also could have the effect of keeping his base unified while he tries to work with Democrats and another GOP health care bill is on the verge of collapsing.

But this is bigger than who becomes the next Alabama senator. This is about where

this moment in history, with a president like President Trump at the helm of the country, fits in. It's another chapter in a divisive history of sports, politics and race.

"This has nothing to do with race"

Trump told reporters in New Jersey Sunday, "No, this has nothing to do with race," when asked if he was inflaming racial tension. "I've never said anything about race. This has nothing to do with race or anything else. This has to do with respect for our country and respect for our flag."

And Trump has plenty of like-minded Americans — and football fans — with him.

"It's disgusting," one woman told a Fox News reporter at the New York Jets-Miami Dolphins game Sunday. She also said what the players were doing was "unethical" and a "disgrace."

Another woman said, "They're paying these guys to do a job. They're not supposed to be involved in politics."

A Quinnipiac Poll last year found that, by a 54-to-38-percent margin, most Americans disagree with NFL players refusing to stand for the anthem.

But there was a huge racial divide. Almost two-thirds of whites disapproved of not standing for the anthem, while three-quarters of African-Americans approved of the tactic.

And that might fundamentally be because of a disagreement over the core issue of the original Kaepernick protest — police violence in black communities. The same poll found 70 percent of whites approve of the job the police are doing, while two-thirds of blacks do not.

Athletes in the NFL are overwhelmingly black — 70 percent of the league, in fact.

A long and complicated history of black athletes protesting in sports

Athletes, especially black athletes, have used the megaphone sports provides to protest for a long time.

...Tommie Smith and John Carlos, American gold and bronze medal winners at the 1968 Olympic Games, donned black gloves and raised their arms in a black power salute from the medal podium in Mexico Cit. (Australian runner Peter Norman, who is white and won the silver, wore an Olympic Project for Human Rights badge in support of their efforts.)

Consider the time: 1968 was another inflection point year in American political and social history. ...Like today, the country was divided politically and along racial lines.

Smith and Carlos, too, were met with opposition to their podium statement. ...After their wins, they were stripped of their medals by the head of the International Olympic Committee.

Of course, there was Muhammad Ali. Born Cassius Clay, the champion boxer converted to Islam in 1964, and when drafted into the Vietnam War in 1967, he refused to go, citing religious convictions. Ali was convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison and banned from boxing for three years. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction in 1971.

Around the same time, Curt Flood of the St. Louis Cardinals made history in 1969 by challenging a clause in professional baseball that essentially said players were teams' property. Flood called himself a "well-paid slave." That triggered mass backlash among whites, but it also helped bring the issue of free agency to the forefront.

Flood's case went to the Supreme Court, where he lost 5-3, but half a dozen years later, an arbitrator went against the Supreme Court's ruling and modern free agency was born. The NFL adopted similar free agency in 1992 and the NBA, the professional basketball league, in 1996....

It often takes guts and courage to protest, because protest means you're standing against something others believe in — or entrenched traditions, which can be extremely difficult to change. Almost universally, the athletes who have stood against what they see as injustice suffered social and economic consequences, not seeing the benefit personally that their efforts led to for others.

Kaepernick still hasn't landed a job in the NFL, despite analysts saying he is at least good enough to be a backup — and that he is playing in a league that has tolerated accused domestic abusers, those arrested for assault and battery, a star who organized dogfighting and much more. (See USA Today's database of hundreds of NFL player arrests.)...

What [Trump] did calling players "sons of bitches," questioning their patriotism (and right to free speech) and calling for their firings, struck a nerve and had an ironic unifying effect across the league.

Owners stood with players arm in arm. Dan Snyder, the owner of Washington, D.C.'s football team, for example — a Trump supporter who donated \$100,000 to help elect him and \$1 million to his inaugural committee — stood on the field, arms locked, with star cornerback Josh Norman, who has been hotly critical of Trump.

"What president?" Norman asked rhetorically after Washington's 27-10 win over the Oakland Raiders Sunday night. "Not my president. He was chosen, true. But when a president acts like that, what do you say to that? That's not someone that stands with dignity, pride, respect, honor. Where's the honor in that? Where's the dignity in that? Where is anything that's prideful in doing what you did? Words are powerful. They can either unite you, or they can divide you. So what he said united us."

Norman went on to say that Trump was "not welcome in Washington, D.C."

Even Patriots owner Bob Kraft, who gave Trump a Super Bowl ring, and quarterback Tom Brady, who was spotted with a Make America Great Again hat in his locker last year, said they disagreed with Trump.

Trump's comments may help to solidify his base and possibly distract from things that they might get upset about (like not being able to repeal Obamacare or trying to work with Democrats), but it is a curious political move.

The remarks landed him right back into the race and culture wars, just a month after his widely criticized response to white supremacists, Nazis and the KKK marching in Charlottesville, Va. And his handling of race relations, Charlottesville and Twitter, are three of the least popular things Trump has done, an NBC/WSJ poll found last week.

For Trump, he says this is not about race — despite his track record of how he waged his campaign and whom he has chosen to insult. Many conservatives agree with him — that regardless of your views, you should be proud of the country.

That was the case for Alejandro Villanueva, a star lineman on the Pittsburgh Steelers, who was the only Steeler to go out on the field for the anthem. Villanueva is a former Army Ranger and Bronze Star recipient. His choice became a meme for conservatives, and #AlejandroVillanueva was trending on Twitter. The choice for players not to go on the field was backed up by Steelers coach Mike Tomlin.

But life is often more complicated than the "Hero" and "Villain" memes of the Internet. Villanueva has said he is also supportive of athletes speaking out on social injustice, but for him, the flag and his service give him a different perspective.

That's not everyone's experience. Certainly, many black athletes (and African-American military members), aware of history, come at it from a different place.

"One brother, you mess with one, you mess with all," Washington's Norman said Sunday night. "Nobody's divided in this."

Now, many owners and white teammates are standing with them, too.

2) Josh Levin, "Colin Kaepernick Won" *Slate*, August 18, 2017.

In angering the NFL's white billionaire owners, the quarterback lost his job but started a movement.

On March 17, Colin Kaepernick celebrated the success of a joint effort to prod Turkish Airlines to fly 60 tons of food and aid to people in Somalia. That same day, Bleacher Report's Mike Freeman reported that, in the words of an anonymous NFL executive, a good proportion of league decision-makers "genuinely hate" the anthem-protesting quarterback "and can't stand what he did. ... I think some teams also want to use Kaepernick as a cautionary tale to stop other players in the future from doing what he did." Three days after that, the president of the United States bragged in the third person that "NFL owners don't want to pick [Kaepernick] up because they don't want to get a nasty tweet from Donald Trump."

Five months later, Kaepernick—who threw 16 touchdown passes and just four interceptions for the San Francisco 49ers last season—remains unsigned, just as Trump predicted. Back in August 2016, when Kaepernick made the simple, radical decision to stay seated for "The Star-Spangled Banner," nobody noticed or cared. When reporters finally asked him about it a few weeks later, the quarterback explained he was protesting police brutality and noted that in some jurisdictions cosmetologists get more rigorous training than cops. Kaepernick's on-field demonstration, and his explanation for it, spawned a level of hatred—Exhibit A: Tomi Lahren's vow to "eviscerate [Kaepernick's] mouth diarrhea"—beyond even what New York Jets fans direct toward their team on Sunday afternoons. At the same time, he won the grudging respect of then-President Barack Obama and earned plaudits from a huge proportion of the press and pro football fans, who made his jersey the top seller in the league's online shop.

Colin Kaepernick can't reasonably be described as an unpopular figure. He is a uniquely polarizing one. One year after he began his protest, Kaepernick has won with the media and lost with the man. We should not be shocked that a league that polices players' touchdown celebrations would not abide a quarterback who took a knee for social justice. The NFL has always been and will always be a redoubt for reactionaries. It is also a closed system, one controlled by billionaires whose views are much further outside the mainstream than Kaepernick's.

In November, the Guardian reported that NFL owners donated 42 times more cash—\$8,052,410 vs. \$189,610.72—to Republican causes as compared with Democratic ones in 2015 and 2016. The Daily Beast subsequently wrote that of the \$107 million raised to finance Donald Trump's inauguration, the NFL's money men chipped in roughly 7 percent, with Washington's Dan Snyder, the Cowboys' Jerry Jones, the Rams' Stan Kroenke, the Patriots' Robert Kraft, the Texans' Bob McNair, the Jaguars' Shahid

Khan, and the Jets' Woody Johnson giving \$1 million each. Johnson, for his part, was recently confirmed as the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom.

A sliver of aggrieved fans is telling the league's ruling cabal what it wants to hear.

Seven months into Trump's tenure, with the president's approval rating plunging to depths that Kaepernick's never did, NFL owners remain the commander in chief's most steadfast constituents.... What NFL owners have said publicly is that Kaepernick's protest is "an emotional, emotional issue for a lot of people." That statement came from the Giants' John Mara, who said "a lot" of fans had told him, "If any of your players ever [protest the anthem], we are never coming to another Giants game." (Some Giants players discussed protesting the anthem last year but ultimately decided to continue standing.)

The disparities in how the public received Kaepernick's protest are unsurprising. A poll conducted last fall by Quinnipiac University found that 63 percent of white Americans disapproved of anthem demonstrations while 74 percent of black Americans approved. Given that the NFL fan base is much whiter than the general population—in its 2013 Year in Sports Media Report, Nielsen noted that white viewers make up 77 percent of the league's TV audience—it's not surprising that owners like Mara would hear from a lot of outraged men and women in replica jerseys. Even so, there's a risk of overselling the level of fan disgust. ...

Owners aren't registering the complaints of Kaepernick haters because they're the only voices to be heard. Rather, their ears are perking up because this sliver of aggrieved fans is telling the league's ruling cabal what it wants to hear.

Two weeks ago, ESPN's Dianna Russini reported that the coaches and/or personnel departments of at least two NFL teams—the Baltimore Ravens and one unnamed franchise—wanted to sign Kaepernick but had been blocked by ownership. ...

In late July, Dolphins owner Stephen Ross (who has publicly supported his players' right to protest) said it's unlikely Kaepernick is being blackballed, because "owners and coaches—they'll do anything it takes to win." Although this remains a widely held belief, recent events suggest there's at least one thing they won't do. ... FiveThirtyEight put it very plainly earlier this month: "No above-average quarterback has been unemployed nearly as long as Kaepernick this offseason." Former Washington general manager Scot McCloughan says he's good enough to be a starter. So do people who've studied his film.

At this point, given the cozy decision-making of the league's top poobahs...[a]n owner who hitched his reputation to Kaepernick's would be asserting that the quarterback had started a necessary conversation about race and policing. The decision to make no statement is a strong political statement itself.

That message, and Kaepernick's method of protest, will carry on without him. Players such as Michael Bennett and Marshawn Lynch have sat during the anthem this preseason. And though LeBron James started to find his voice before Kaepernick found his, the country's most famous athlete began to speak out more consistently and forcefully after the quarterback took a knee. ...Kaepernick was never a perfect spokesman... But a spokesman shouldn't have to be perfect for his message to be heard.

Kaepernick's race clearly played a massive role in the way his words and deeds were received. ...The league's owners won't change their views on Kaepernick or anthem protests of their own accord, and they've already scared some players into

silence. “The league, the owners are trying to send a message of, ‘Stay in between the lines.’ ”

Colin Kaepernick did not stay in between the lines. As a consequence of what he did and when he did it, the quarterback put himself at greater risk than other athletes who’ve walked a similar path. By starting a movement, Kaepernick made himself the lightning rod, drawing criticism away from those who followed in his footsteps....

In a different league, with different fans and different owners, Kaepernick might have been hailed as a hero. In the NFL, he strayed from the narrow path that players are allowed to walk, and he lost his job as a result.

3) Mike Florio “Calls for NFL boycott emerging from Colin Kaepernick’s unemployment,” NBC, August 19, 2017

The crowdsourcing effort by teams like the Ravens to determine whether Colin Kaepernick should have a job now has another factor to consider: Fans who believe Kaepernick is being unfairly shunned may shun pro football.

In addition to online petitions that have lingered for the past few weeks, the Atlanta NAACP announced on Friday a boycott of the NFL.

...“Kaepernick engaged in a silent, non-violent protest,” says Senior Pastor Deblaire Snell of the First SDA Church in Huntsville, Alabama. “He did this to raise awareness to the number of brown and black individuals that have been beaten and killed at the hands of law enforcement across this country. Since the end of last season, as a result of this protest, Colin Kaepernick has been unable to find employment in the NFL. I find that strange, seeing that the NFL has employed individuals that have been convicted of sexual assault, domestic violence, cruelty to animals, along with driving while under the influence. A number of NFL owners have come out and stated the reason they cannot employ him is because of a fear of a backlash from sponsors or a certain segment of their fan base. And it’s interesting that they’ve capitulated thus far to a certain segment of the fan base while fearing no backlash from the African-American community. . . .

“My belief is simply this. If Colin Kaepernick was willing to take a stand for those of us who are non-celebrities that would have to interact with law enforcement on a day-to-day basis, if he’s willing to take a knee for us, certainly we ought to take a stand, and stand with him.”

“We want you to know this protest is not anti-flag, because people of color love the Stars and Stripes,” says Dr. Leslie N. Pollard, president of Oakwood University. “This protest is not anti-American, because people of color have loved this country, even when this country has not loved us back. And this protest is not anti-veteran, because we support those who have made sacrifices so that our liberties have been secured. This protest is to ensure the rights of all Americans regardless of color and creed to be heard.”

It’s one thing to launch the effort. It’s another thing for the effort to have an impact.

Regardless, the effort officially has been launched. And now the NFL and its teams will have to decide whether to risk angering one side over potentially alienating the other side.

Ideally, the NFL and its teams would forget about who it’s going to upset and instead make a decision based on the core question of right vs. wrong.