

Whither The NFL: Will Colin Kaepernick Bring Them To Their Knees?

by Marc Epstein



On August 14, 2016 quarterback Colin Kaepernick remained seated on the team bench during the playing of the national anthem at a pre-season game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Green Bay Packers. He stated that it was to protest the treatment of minorities.

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color ... To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

His protests weren't noticed until he started the August 26th

game. Kaepernick soon graduated to kneeling instead of just sitting out the Star Spangled banner in subsequent games. It wasn't long before Kaepernick inserted his protests into the presidential campaign.

In a lengthy interview with sports reporters that appeared in the Mercury News, Kaepernick expanded his critique of American society, turning his attention to the upcoming election. He was asked if his protest was timed to the election.

-KAEPERNICK: Once again, it wasn't a timing thing. It wasn't something that was planned.

But I think the two presidential candidates that we currently have also represent the issue that we have in this country right now.

-Q: Do you want to expound on that?

-KAEPERNICK: I mean, you have Hillary who's called black teens or black kids super-predators.

You have Donald Trump who's openly racist

Donald Trump, arguably one of the most remarkable catalytic agents in American political history, joined the issue and made it into one of the subtexts of his campaign and his presidency. If Kaepernick wanted a culture war Trump would be glad to oblige.

"I think it's personally not a good thing. I think it's a terrible thing," "And, you know, maybe he should find a country that works better for him. Let him try. It won't happen."

After the first Presidential debate in September, Kaepernick demonstrated that he had no intention of steering clear of the issue and resuming his football career; "Both [Trump and Clinton] are proven liars, and it almost seems like they're trying to debate who is less racist, and at this point, ..."

Was Kaepernick simply the NFL's iteration of Mrs. O'Leary's cow, or was it a blossoming of a well-cultivated ideology of grievance nurtured by Barack Obama over the course of his eight-year presidency?

By happenstance, Kaepernick turns out to be a mirror image of Barack Obama. Both were born of an interracial union and raised in white middle class households. The inner city black experience played no part in their upbringing.

But that didn't prevent them from identifying with what they perceived to be the existential threat facing black Americans today. Neither was their upbringing an impediment to leading the cause of social justice, restorative justice, and Black lives matter.

In a "60 Minutes" interview in 2007, Steve Kroft asked Michelle Obama if she feared that a black presidential candidate faced a greater threat because of his race. Her response foreshadowed a sentiment that would become part of Obama's legacy and public policy during his two terms.

"I don't lose sleep about it," "Because the realities are, as a black man, you know, Barack can get shot going to the gas station"—

In the course of the interview that appeared in the Mercury News a decade later, Kaepernick was asked, "Do you personally feel oppressed?"

His response echoes Michelle Obama.

"There have been situations where I feel like I've been ill-treated, yes. But this stand wasn't for me. This stand wasn't because I feel like I'm being put down in any kind of way."

Within weeks the kneeling protests had spread throughout the league. But unlike the "Hands Up Don't Shoot" displays of 2014 when a grand jury failed to indict Officer Daren Wilson for

the shooting of Michael Brown, the national anthem kneeling protests took on a life of their own.

President Obama soon came to Kaepernick's defense,

"I want Mr. Kaepernick and others who are on a knee to listen to the pain that that may cause somebody who, for example, had a spouse or a child who was killed in combat and why it hurts them to see somebody not standing," Obama said. "I also want people to think about the pain he may be expressing about somebody who's lost a loved one that they think was unfairly shot."

It is the message Obama had honed after the Henry Louis Gates contretemps on involving the Cambridge police.

"I don't know, not having been there and not seeing all the facts, what role race played in that [Gates case]. But I think it's fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home; and, number three, what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That's just a fact." (ABC NEWS)

And repeated in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting and Ferguson riots.

"At the same time, though, Obama said the separate Justice Department report this week about widespread racism within the Ferguson police department – and specific practices that singled out African Americans, like arresting them disproportionately and using unreasonable force – proved that Ferguson residents had valid complaints about the police force."

"Obama urged the crowd not to let the Ferguson report make

them hostile toward police officers around the country. 'I don't think that what happened in Ferguson was typical,' he said. Most police officers, he said, 'have a really hard and dangerous job, and they do it well ... I strongly believe that.'" (POLITICO)

The explosion of the "hands up don't" myth by an exhaustive state and Federal investigation involving a small army of DOJ and FBI officials did nothing to change the white privilege trope Obama had enshrined to large swaths of his constituency.

Not to be outdone, Donald Trump articulated a contrarian view. He told a rally in Alabama that those demonstrating against the flag should be fired.

"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, out, he's fired!'

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodall called Trumps remarks divisive. "...Comments like these demonstrate an unfortunate lack of respect for the NFL, our great game and all of our players, and a failure to understand the overwhelming force for good our clubs and players represent in our communities."

Subsequently, there were major declines in NFL attendance and TV ratings. By November of 2017, NFL owners attempted to assuage their players by locking arms during the playing of the anthem. They proposed a \$90 million donation to social justice causes that was met with skepticism by activist players who called it a charade. The terms were finalized with the Players Coalition in May.

But the waters are still roiling. President Trump cancelled the traditional Super Bowl victor's visit to the White House when it was learned that most of the Philadelphia Eagles would not be coming.

At about the same time Trump, who has demonstrated time and again his willingness to call someone's bluff, adroitly asked NFL players to provide him a list of people they thought had been unfairly incarcerated by the criminal justice system. He had just commuted the life sentence for first-time offender Alice Marie Johnson, a 63 year-old grandmother, at the urging of Kim Kardashian. She is black.

At a nationally televised political rally held in Montana, on July 5th, Trump attacked the NFL's new regulation that allowed protesting players to sit out the pledge in the locker room. "Just go into the locker room. I think in many respects that's worse. Isn't that worse than having them not standing?"

The NFL players association, not to be outdone, filed a grievance against the owners on July 10th, claiming that the new regulation violates the rights of the players.

"The union's claim is that this new policy, imposed by the NFL's governing body without consultation with the NFLPA, is inconsistent with the collective bargaining agreement and infringes on player rights,"

The NFL finds is caught in a perfect storm. Fan loyalty has been frayed not only by politics, but also by new technologies, "cord cutting," and fantasy football that make every participant an owner of their own fantasy team, while severing their connection to the home team.

A political agenda that posits that multi-million dollar salaried football players are little more than plantation worker's, who leave the game with permanent brain damage, while their billionaire owner-masters live happily ever after, has added more fuel to the social justice protests. Three quarters of the players may be black, but that can't be said of the owners.

Burgess Owens, a black ten-year veteran of the NFL believes

that all of these problems can be laid at the door of the Democrats. Owens, a Mormon, and father of six, has been outspoken in his belief that the disintegration of the black family is the root cause of player's discontents.

"We are dealing with an ideology that first of all bans God, has destroyed the black family in the '70s which we led the country in terms of the strength of our family unit,

"We have come to the point because of liberalism, because of what Democratic policies do, 70% of black men do not stay around. They don't have these parents and these fathers to tell them what they should be proud of and how they should stand up for this process," the former New York Jet said.

When all is said and done Burgess Owens insights help explain the lack of sympathy displayed by a public that has lost patience with the player's tantrums.

We anxiously await this season's opening kick-off.