

The NFL's Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson—and the moral high ground of American corporations

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In response to recent incidents involving US professional football players Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, a number of large corporations have expressed “concern” or even withdrawn sponsorships.

Rice, a running back for the Baltimore Ravens until his recent suspension, was captured on videotape punching his fiancée and knocking her unconscious. Peterson, a running back for the Minnesota Vikings, was indicted last week in Montgomery, Texas on charges of reckless or negligent injury to a child for allegedly beating his four-year-old son with a switch. Peterson was deactivated for one game by the Vikings.

Rice's action was deplorable and Peterson's may have been as well, but the focus of the National Football League and the media on the actions of these two individuals is entirely dishonest and self-serving.

In the first place, violent behavior was not invented by Rice and Peterson. Professional sports generally recruits its participants from the most oppressed layers and neighborhoods, where the brutality of American class society is a fact of everyday life.

Ray Rice grew up in poverty in a housing project in New Rochelle, New York. His father was killed in a drive-by shooting, in a case of mistaken identity, when he was one. Adrian Peterson was born and raised in the city of Palestine, in East Texas. According to reports, he was regularly beaten or whipped by his father—in one case, in front of 20 fellow students in a parking lot.

The responsibility for such individuals' abusive conduct toward others lies squarely with the society that produced them.

Moreover, professional football in particular encourages brutality. Like recruits in the armed forces, football players are incited by coaches in training camp

and practice to conduct themselves as savagely as possible. As an NBC Sports commentary noted, “In an ordinary workplace, a boss who screams obscenities into the faces of his underlings would not be tolerated. ... [But] an NFL team is not an ordinary workplace.”

Professional football tolerates, and even promotes, a high level of (relatively) regulated violence, playing on the most backward impulses of an angry, frustrated population. When an individual crosses the line, however, either on or off the field, and threatens the game's “integrity,” i.e., its marketability, league officials and the media come down on him like a ton of bricks, without the slightest regard for due process.

The growing brutality, and even sadism, of professional sports in America is bound up with the increasing aggressiveness and recklessness of US foreign policy and the massive build-up of domestic police forces. Football in particular is sold to the public on quasi-patriotic-militaristic grounds.

In November 2009, the *New York Times*, for example, noted that by the end of one two-hour edition of “Fox NFL Sunday,” broadcast from Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan (in which all the participants on the sports talk show dressed in fatigues), “a visitor from another planet might easily have concluded that football and warfare were the same thing.”

And it must be said, that whatever cruelty Rice and Peterson meted out to loved ones or family members, far worse has probably been done to them by simply participating in professional football. As the WSWWS recently reported, the NFL has acknowledged that, “it expects nearly a third of retired players to develop long-term cognitive problems.” The link between repeated concussions sustained by football players and the high

incidence of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and Parkinson's disease has been well documented.

All that being said, an element of the current controversy surrounding NFL player violence that should not be lost sight of for a moment is the breathtaking hypocrisy of the giant firms that have threatened to or actually broken ties with the league or individual players.

The Radisson hotel chain announced September 15 that it was suspending its limited sponsorship deal with the Vikings. Radisson asserted that it "takes this matter very seriously particularly in light of our long-standing commitment to the protection of children."

In a statement issued last week, PepsiCo commented, "Domestic violence is completely unacceptable. We are encouraged to see the NFL is now treating this with the seriousness it deserves."

On Tuesday, Anheuser-Busch, the giant brewing company and maker of the NFL's official beer, released a statement in which the firm indicated that it was "disappointed and increasingly concerned by the recent incidents that have overshadowed this NFL season. We are not yet satisfied with the league's handling of behaviors that so clearly go against our own company culture and moral code."

Except for Radisson, none of the firms actually announced even a temporary break with the NFL or any of its teams. As one industry expert commented bluntly, "These agreements are for long terms ... If you leave and then come back at a later time, it might be more expensive. It might be more challenging. It might be a lot of things." [*USA Today*, September 16, 2014]

The Rice-Peterson affair provides an opportunity for these companies to posture as good corporate citizens. In reality, even by the ruthless standards of global capitalism, American corporations are renowned for their heartlessness and criminality, for their absolute devotion to the bottom line. When it comes to accumulating personal fortunes, corporate executives in the US think nothing of shedding tens of thousands of jobs, slashing wages and devastating entire communities.

In an unhappy irony, these everyday practices of American companies contribute directly to domestic violence and child abuse. Innumerable studies, both academic and less formal, have linked layoffs to

mistreatment in the home. Spikes in domestic violence were noted by police forces in the years following the 2008 financial crash. In Camden, New Jersey, for instance, where police responded to 9,100 domestic incidents in 2011, up from 7,500 the year before, police chief Scott Thomson told *USA Today* it was "impossible" to separate the economy from the domestic turmoil in the city where unemployment was officially 19 percent.

Add to this the rampant corporate corruption and thievery, the deliberate deception of the public in a thousand ways in the interest of profit, the willingness of companies to put thousands of lives at risk through polluting the atmosphere or suppressing information about dangerous or faulty equipment and vehicles ... and one begins to obtain a picture of the high ground from which US corporations preach morality to Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson.



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