

Intensifying his attack on NFL players, Trump continues to incite the ultra-right

Alan Gilman
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During a campaign appearance September 22 in Alabama, President Donald Trump called for National Football League (NFL) owners to fire players who kneeled in protest during the national anthem. As Trump provocatively bellowed, “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,” the right-wing audience erupted in wild applause and chanted “USA,USA,USA.”

By “disrespect” Trump was referring to protests begun last year by San Francisco 49ers’ quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who initiated the practice of refusing to stand during the playing of the national anthem to protest police killings of African Americans. Subsequently, some of Kaepernick’s teammates and players from other teams joined in similar symbolic protests during the playing of the anthem. Protests also took place at college and high school football games.

Kaepernick, who is considered one of the top 20 quarterbacks, was effectively blacklisted by NFL owners and not offered a contract this year. NFL teams are owned by billionaires or near billionaires for the most part, many of whom are personal friends of Trump. Six of the owners contributed nearly \$8,000,000 to Trump’s inaugural committee.

The anthem protests this season were relatively low-key to begin with, with a few players taking a knee or raising a fist during the “Star-Spangled Banner.” What seemingly had become almost a non-issue erupted into a firestorm after Trump put in his reactionary two cents, calling for players to be fired for exercising their right of free speech.

Pleased with the response from his ultra-right base, and the reaction from “over-paid athletes” as well as the media, Trump escalated his provocative campaign on Saturday by tweeting that he was withdrawing an invitation to honor the Golden State Warriors on winning the National Basketball Association (NBA) championship

because Stephen Curry, one of its star players, had expressed his reservations about attending the traditional White House event.

This caused dozens of the league’s most popular players to issue statements condemning Trump. LeBron James, one of the NBA’s best players, tweeted that Trump was a “bum” for withdrawing the invitation, and later said, “He [Trump] used the sports platform to divide us. Sports is so amazing, what sports can do for everyone, no matter shape, size, race. It brings people together like no other. I’m not going to let one individual no matter the power, the impact he or she should have, ever use sport as a platform to divide us. The people run this country, not one person. And damn sure not him.”

Former basketball great Michael Jordan, known during his career for not commenting on controversial issues, said, “Those who exercise the right to peacefully express themselves should not be demonized or ostracized.” Other past or present NBA players, including Russell Westbrook, Dirk Nowitzki, J.J. Redick and Magic Johnson, as well as coaches Doc Rivers, Greg Popovich and Brad Stevens among others, all condemned Trump’s attacks on NFL and NBA players.

On Saturday, Oakland A’s rookie catcher Bruce Maxwell became the first Major League Baseball player to kneel during the anthem.

This past Sunday, NFL players’ opposition to Trump’s threats was overwhelming, with many players either kneeling, sitting or locking arms. Three teams remained in their locker rooms during the playing of the anthem.

Singers Rico Lavelle in Detroit and Meghan Linsey in Nashville each took a knee at the end of his or her rendition of the anthem. At the Monday night game in Arizona, singer Jordin Sparks had written “Proverbs 31:8-9” on her hand. The passage in question reads, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge

fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Before Sparks began to sing, all of the Dallas Cowboy players and coaches, along with team owner Jerry Jones, dropped to one knee before standing again and locking arms as the anthem was sung. Jones was one of those owners who donated \$1 million to Trump’s inauguration committee and in the past expressed the view that players should not protest the anthem.

Al Michaels, the longtime sports announcer, noted on Sunday evening, “People were beginning to listen to each other, it was calming down a little bit, and then a match got thrown into the gas tank. And the one thing that I came away with today after watching these games is it has galvanized the league—players, coaches, everybody. It’s inadvertently created a new level of unity.”

Michaels’ description accurately describes Trump’s provocative behavior and the impact it had in uniting players and wide layers of the population in defense of basic democratic rights. His statement ignores, however, that Trump’s incendiary remarks were intended to “galvanize” a nascent fascist base.

The NFL anthem protests, which involve predominately African-American players expressing opposition to police killings of black youth, becomes transformed by Trump into “ungrateful” and “overpaid” blacks desecrating the flag, the police and the military

On Monday, Trump doubled down in the aftermath of Sunday’s NFL players’ protest, by tweeting he was “So proud of NASCAR [National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing] and its supporters and fans. They won’t put up with disrespecting our Country or our Flag—they said it loud and clear!” Trump was referencing a NASCAR race in New Hampshire on Sunday in which no anthem protests took place.

However, on Monday morning, NASCAR’s most popular driver, Dale Earnhardt Jr., implicitly rejected Trump’s anti-democratic campaign, tweeting that “All Americans R [are] granted rights 2 [to] peaceful protests,” and, significantly, quoted John F. Kennedy, “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

Trump next made an appeal to the military. He sent out a “#StandForOurAnthem” tweet in which he referenced Pat Tillman as an example of how a patriotic football player should act. Tillman was a NFL player who gave up his lucrative career in 2002, following 9/11, to join the military. He was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan 2004, although initially the military promoted the story that he had been killed by insurgents. Tillman had become

increasingly critical of George W. Bush and the US-led wars and had made an appointment to meet with war opponent Noam Chomsky on his return from the military.

Tillman’s widow, Marie, rebuked Trump for his comments this week, saying that her husband died to protect freedoms including the right to peacefully protest. “The very action of self expression and the freedom to speak from one’s heart—no matter those views—is what Pat and so many other Americans have given their lives for,” she told CNN. This was not the first time Marie Tillman has spoken out against Trump. In January, she denounced his controversial executive order banning travel from several majority-Muslim countries: “This is not the country [Pat] dreamed of, not what he served for and not what he died for.”

Despite criticism from a broad spectrum of professional athletes and public figures, Trump continued his campaign of provocations on Tuesday during a joint press conference with Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The US president once again asserted that it was “disgraceful” that NFL players chose to kneel in protest. Earlier in the day he defended his criticism of the NFL and its players and urged the league to impose rules requiring players to stand for the national anthem.

On Wednesday, he told reporters, “You cannot have people disrespecting our national anthem, our flag, our country and that’s what they’re doing. In my opinion the NFL has to change. Or you know what’s going to happen? Their business is going to go to hell.”

Despite his unpopularity, Trump can be expected to continue his campaign of incitement and provocation. It speaks to the tense social and political situation and the efforts to incite reactionary elements against the inevitable mass opposition to poverty, war and threats of dictatorship. Trump’s latest attempts to whip up fascistic elements are designed ultimately to organize those forces, with the backing of the police and the military, to violently suppress political opposition.



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