

Trump and Pence orchestrate national anthem provocation at NFL game

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On Sunday Vice President Mike Pence left a National Football League (NFL) football game between the Indianapolis Colts and the San Francisco 49ers after players carried out acts of protest during the national anthem, saying he did not want to “dignify” the demonstration.

Pence, the former governor of Indiana, attended the game with his wife Karen at the Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, wearing a Colts hat and shirt with his wife attired in a team jersey. During the playing of the national anthem, about 20 members of the San Francisco 49ers knelt on one knee as the anthem played. Some members of the Colts protested as well, standing with arms locked while wearing t-shirts declaring they were standing for “equality, justice, unity, respect, dialogue, opportunity.”

Immediately following the anthem, Pence and his wife left the stadium and Pence issued the following tweet. “I left today’s Colts game because and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem ...”

Trump then chimed in on Twitter, writing: “I asked [Vice President Pence] to leave stadium if any players knelt, disrespecting our country. I am proud of him and [Second Lady] Karen.”

The White House later issued a statement quoting Pence as saying: “I left today’s Colts game because President Trump and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem. ... I stand with President Trump, I stand with our soldiers, and I will always stand for our Flag and our National Anthem.”

The contrived nature of this provocative stunt was revealed when it was learned that the media pool was kept in vans outside the stadium instead of being led inside with Pence. A staffer told the pool reporters there

was a chance Pence would depart early, but did not mention why or how early.

By attending a game involving the San Francisco 49ers, Pence was assured there would be an anthem demonstration. These protests originated last year with former 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who began the practice of kneeling during the playing of the Star Spangled Banner to protest police killings of black youth.

Kaepernick was subsequently blacklisted and has not been signed by any team this year. His teammate safety Eric Reid, the first player to join Kaepernick in taking a knee during last year’s anthem protests, had made it clear that his protest would continue this season and he and several other 49er players have knelt during the anthem at each game this season.

When Reid was informed after the game of Pence actions and comments, he responded, “This was like a PR stunt. This is what systemic oppression looks like.”

The anthem protests during the first few games this season had been relatively low-key, with a few players taking a knee or raising a fist. What seemingly had become almost a non-issue erupted into a firestorm when on September 22, during a campaign rally before an ultra-right audience in Alabama, Trump called upon NFL owners to put a stop to player protests during the anthem. He 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.”

Trump’s provocative remarks caused an outpouring of condemnation from professional athletes from a variety of sports. The games on Sunday, September 24 saw hundreds of players, coaches, some owners, and even a few anthem singers, joining in various forms of protest before or during the anthem.

In the days that followed Trump continued to incite his ultra-right base by issuing a number of inflammatory statements about “overpaid” and “disrespectful” athletes. He called upon football fans to boycott NFL games unless the league fires or suspends players who refuse to stand for the national anthem, saying that players must “stop disrespecting our flag and country.”

By the following week the controversy had significantly subsided, with many teams kneeling before the anthem, and then rising as the anthem played, while some players would remain kneeling. Trump’s hoped for fan boycott never materialized.

By directing Pence to stage his provocative walkout after Sunday’s 49er anthem protest, Trump is again appealing to the NFL owners, with the backing and support of his ultra-right supporters, to reassert control of their players, and to make an example of how social and political opposition is to be suppressed.

In response to Trump’s dictates and with the help of Pence’s stunt, some of the billionaire NFL owners, who two weeks ago felt compelled to make tepid criticisms of the president and be “supportive” of their players’ concern, are now beginning to express a willingness to carry out Trump’s orders.

Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who contributed \$1 million to Trump’s Inaugural Committee and who two weeks ago knelt with his players before the playing of the anthem, said Sunday when asked about Pence’s actions, “I know this, we cannot ... in the NFL in any way give the implication that we tolerate disrespecting the flag. We know that there is a serious debate in this country about those issues, but there is no question in my mind that the National Football League and the Dallas Cowboys are going to stand up for the flag. So we’re clear. ... But if there’s anything that is disrespectful to the flag, then we will not play. OK? Understand? If we are disrespecting the flag, then we won’t play. Period.”

Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross, who also had supported his players kneeling in protest during the national anthem, announced on Sunday he has changed his view because of the president’s intervention. “Trump has made [standing for anthem] about patriotism,” he said, and consequently all Dolphin players will be required to stand for the anthem. Ross also added that those who chose not to stand may

remain in the locker room, out of public view.

Before Sunday’s game three Miami players, Kenny Stills, Julius Thomas, and Michael Thomas remained in the Dolphins locker room during the anthem.



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