

Trump rescinds Philadelphia Eagles' White House invitation in latest provocation against NFL players

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On Monday evening President Donald Trump announced the cancellation of the scheduled visit by the Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles to the White House Tuesday. Reports indicate that of the over 80 players and team personnel who were invited, less than 10 had planned to attend.

Taking offense at the expected size of the Eagles delegation, Trump seized upon it as an opportunity to continue his assault on National Football League (NFL) players and democratic rights generally. In rescinding the White House invitation, Trump issued a statement declaring that the players were not attending because of their refusal to stand properly for the national anthem.

"The Philadelphia Eagles are unable to come to the White House with their full team to be celebrated tomorrow. They disagree with their President because he insists that they proudly stand for the National Anthem, hand on heart, in honor of the great men and women of our military and the people of our country," Trump's statement read.

In place of the cancelled Eagles appearance, Trump held a "patriotism" event at the White House Tuesday afternoon. During the brief ceremony Trump exhorted his followers to "explain why young Americans stand for our national anthem." Trump then proceeded to sing along to "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America" accompanied by the Marine and Army bands.

Two attendees at the event were seen taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem, echoing the protests made by numerous players over the last two years. "Stop hiding behind the armed services and the national anthem," one of the protestors shouted at Trump.

The anthem controversy began two years ago when

Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, began kneeling during the playing of the national anthem as a protest against the wave of police killings of young black men which had inspired nationwide outrage and popular protests.

Kaepernick's courageous actions, and the subsequent right-wing media assault upon his freedom of speech, inspired widespread protests by professional athletes around the country, including players from nearly every NFL team. Throughout the 2016 football season dozens of players either took a knee during the playing of the national anthem, raised their fists in protest, or remained in the locker room.

Similar protests were engaged in by both high school and college athletes around the US, an indication of broad support for Kaepernick among the population.

Kaepernick left the 49ers at the end of the 2016 season and entered free agency, making him eligible to be signed by any NFL team. Despite his universally acknowledged skill as a player, Kaepernick was blacklisted for his protests and not signed by any team for the 2017 season. In October 2017, Kaepernick filed a collusion grievance against the NFL team owners, alleging that they were conspiring to deny him employment due to his political stance.

The on-field protests had diminished by the start of the 2017 season, with only a few players continuing to kneel. This changed when President Trump, in an attempt to mobilize his most reactionary supporters and divert attention from his crisis-ridden administration, launched a public attack on the NFL for not cracking down more forcefully on protests, declaring, "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 actions inspired a new upsurge of protests, with entire teams taking a knee or remaining in the locker rooms before games. In many cases, the players were joined by the coaching staffs and in some cases even the owners themselves.

Behind the scenes, however, the owners, of whom many are billionaires and are Trump supporters, had become very alarmed of the effect Trump's actions were having on their bottom line and were intent on implementing measures to silence their players.

The owners' response was formalized last month when the NFL announced a new policy which forbids players from engaging in on-field protests and requires all players present on the field to stand for the national anthem. Any team whose players violate this rule will face being fined by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. The new policy also encourages individual teams to create their own policies to punish players who engage in on-field protests.

The disingenuousness and irony of Trump's latest provocation against NFL players is illustrated by the fact that no Eagles player last year ever kneeled during the anthem. More importantly, however, many Eagles players were outspoken supporters of Kaepernick and issues involving social justice and inequality.

Defensive end Chris Long donated his entire 2017 game salary to various charities including scholarships for underprivileged children in his hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia in response to the violent protests held there by white nationalists last August.

Long also condemned the new NFL anthem policy, declaring, "This is a fear of a diminished bottom line. It's also fear of a president turning his base against a corporation. This is not patriotism. Don't get it confused. These owners don't love America more than the players demonstrating and taking real action to improve it."

Eagles safety Malcom Jenkins was also one of the most prominent players to speak out in defense of Kaepernick and in support of the issues being raised by the anthem protests. In response to Trump's cancellation, Jenkins wrote in a social media post, "The decision was made to lie and paint the picture that these players are anti-America, anti-flag, anti-military...We will continue to fight for impacted citizens and give a voice to those who never had one."

"We've fed the hungry, we've mentored our youth, we've fought to create opportunities for communities and individuals who have been disenfranchised, we've given scholarships, and the list goes on, it's not our job. No one elected us to do this. We do it because we love this country and our communities. Everyone, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, deserves to be treated equally...We are fighting for racial and social equality."

Wide receiver Torrey Smith tweeted similar sentiments, "There are a lot of people on the team that have plenty of different views. The men and women that wanted to go should've been able to go. It's a cowardly act to cancel the celebration because the majority of the people don't want to see you. To make it about the anthem is foolish."

National Basketball Association (NBA) star LeBron James whose Cleveland Cavaliers are currently playing the Golden State Warriors for the league's championship, responded to Trump's latest attack on professional athletes by announcing "No matter who wins this series, no one wants the invite [to the White House]. It won't be Golden State or Cleveland going."

James added, "I think as long as he's in the office, the communication and things like that is gonna continue to happen. It's a lot of things that we believe in as Americans that we don't feel that he's for. It's a lot of people that believe that he's not for the people or doing things that are not right by the people."



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