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In Trump vs. the NFL, the contest isn't even close

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Whatever you think about NFL players kneeling during the national anthem, a few things about the spat between President Donald Trump and those players should be beyond dispute:

- (1) It is completely inexcusable for the president to call any American citizen a “son of a bitch” in a public speech. If Barack Obama had referred that way to, say, a NASCAR driver who had criticized U.S. policies, the reaction would have bordered on pandemonium.
- (2) Likewise, the president’s focus on this issue — to the exclusion of more important ones, such as the increasingly desperate situation in Puerto Rico — sullies his office. As with his other petty feuds, Trump has not elevated the discussion; he has dragged the Oval Office into the wrestling ring.
- (3) The president has shown far less sympathy and understanding for black men protesting racial injustice than he did for white men trying to perpetuate it in Charlottesville. After the race riot there last month, Trump insisted that there were “some very fine people on both sides.” Even in his infamous remarks about illegal Mexican immigrants — when he insisted “they’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” — he modulated his remarks by conceding that “some, I assume, are good people.”

Are there no fine or good people among the NFL players protesting during the national anthem? In Trump’s view, the answer apparently is no. They are all sons of bitches.

Recently the country has found itself embroiled in a debate over free speech. Conservatives and some liberals have, quite properly, condemned the hostility to free expression that has greeted conservative speakers (and even those who are not so conservative). That hostility has grown out of a smothering leftist orthodoxy on the modern American college campus. Indeed, Trump won election in no small part by denouncing political correctness.

But as Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute pointed out in another newspaper, conservatives often have their own version of political correctness, which Nowrasteh dubs “patriotic correctness.” Like left-wing political correctness, it declares certain points of view off limits. It brooks no dissent, and allows for no subtlety or nuance.

Hence Trump’s insistence that “The issue of kneeling has nothing to do with race. It is about respect for our Country, Flag and National Anthem. NFL must respect this!” Most of the NFL players who have taken a knee likely would say that they love and respect America as much as the next person; they simply want the country to live up to its ideal of liberty and justice for all.

You can disagree with the players about the merits of the issue. You can argue that they should find another avenue for expressing their political opinions. But Trump’s demand that they be fired is a call for enforced ideological conformity that those who grew up behind the Iron Curtain would recognize all too well. It is a greater insult to American values than anything the players have done.