



## Donald Trump vs. The NFL And The World

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President Donald Trump's brouhaha involving NFL and other professional athletes refusing to stand during the playing of the national anthem spells trouble for his ability to lead on domestic matters. But it also tells us something about his ability to conduct U.S. foreign policy. And if I am right about that, all signs point to Trump leading the United States into risky confrontations, and possibly even war.

Trump's comments two Fridays ago (amplified during a series of tweets and subsequent public statements over the weekend), have served as a distraction: By setting the agenda, Trump focuses attention where he wants it, and away from where he doesn't.

And there was plenty of news that the president desperately wanted off the front page and the cable news scroll. Mere hours before Trump's remarks, for example, Sen. John McCain signaled that he would not support the GOP's latest bid to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. The media has devoted hours and hours of coverage to the kneeling controversy, and far less attention to the collapse of the GOP's repeal efforts, or to hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico.

On the other hand, Trump's effort to deflect attention backfired. Badly.

When Trump weighed in, many people had long since forgotten what had occasioned San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick's protest in the first place. Since the time that Kaepernick chose not to stand during the playing of the anthem in August 2016, only a handful of players had chosen to do the same. Indeed, Kaepernick was out of a job and generally out of the limelight. No NFL team picked up his contract for the 2017 season. Some speculated that Kaepernick's quiet protest was an unnecessary distraction for teams that should be focused on winning games on the field, not political points with those watching in the stands or at home. The whole episode seemed like it was long over.

Then Trump spoke and tweeted, casting a bright light on the racial inequalities of American society in ways that Kaepernick never could. Dozens of athletes from several major sports voiced objections to the president's call for NFL owners to fire protesting players, as did NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. By Sunday, the Associated Press counted at least 130 players who kneeled during the national anthem. Several teams — including the Seattle Seahawks, Tennessee Titans, and Pittsburgh Steelers — didn't take the field until after the anthem was concluded.

And how did the owners respond? They certainly had a right to do as the president suggested. Employers can set rules and guidelines for their employees, and discipline those who defy company policy.

But that's not what happened.

Among the owners who have weighed in on the controversy, most, including New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, the Dallas Cowboys' Jerry Jones, and Robert McNair of the Houston Texans, came out strongly in favor of the players. Each had donated \$1 million to Trump's inaugural committee, and are presumably among the sports owners that Trump counted as his friends.

Other owners appeared to have changed their minds about players expressing themselves politically — in other words, overturning the policy that was in place *before* Trump's remarks. Last year, Oakland Raiders owner Mark Davis had asked Raiders players not to protest as Kaepernick had done. Last Sunday, Davis told ESPN, "I can no longer ask our team to not say something while they are in a Raider uniform. The only thing I can ask them to do is do it with class. Do it with pride."

What does all this have to do with foreign policy? Don't worry, I am getting there.

Leadership entails convincing a person or group of people to act as the leader wishes. Sometimes the desired end is clear. At other times, a leader merely sets forth broad objectives, and counts on his followers to fill in the details.

What occurred over the weekend was of the former variety. Trump urged the owners to fire protesting players and demanded a new rule requiring all players to stand during the national anthem, and they did the opposite. The real estate magnate turned president has always been comfortable lecturing private business owners on how they should behave. Those who didn't respond to rhetorical pressure have been subject to threats. In this latest episode, Trump effectively called on his supporters to boycott the NFL, but this doesn't seem to have worked, either.

In other words, the outcome of this whole situation is exactly contrary to what Trump ostensibly aimed for. And this is why Trump's comments, and the response to them, portends trouble for his leadership — and for America's interests.

To be sure, American leadership was always a mixed bag. Many Americans imagine a time when Uncle Sam called the tune, and everyone else merely danced. But that is mostly a myth. We shouldn't romanticize a glorious past that never existed.

In fact, even at the height of U.S. power and influence, friends and allies often resisted or simply ignored Washington's entreaties. At other times, they openly defied U.S. leaders' wishes. In 1956, for example, Britain and France conspired with Israel to try to retake the Suez Canal from Egypt. The action blindsided President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the midst of a reelection campaign, and while he was handling a crisis with the Soviet Union over Hungary. Ike eventually forced a retreat, but real damage had already been done.

Small, weak partners, too, and even de facto U.S. client states, have all challenged American leadership from time to time. The leaders in South Vietnam refused to reform their corrupt political system in the late 1950s and 60s, but U.S. financial and military aid kept coming. And in the 1970s and 1980s, various perilous partners, from Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko to the Shah of Iran, routinely engaged in brutal repression, despite American pleas to respect human rights and the rule of law.

The end of the Cold War reduced the incentives for many countries to stick with Washington. The Iraq War and the financial meltdown in 2008 delivered more body blows to American leadership. Trump's ascent to the White House may prove to be yet another. And we shouldn't expect that foreign leaders will be any more solicitous of Trump's calls for action than NFL owners have been.

For example, if Trump pulls out of the nuclear deal with Iran, as he and others in the administration have hinted that they will do, will the other parties to the deal (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany) follow suit? Early signs suggest they will not. Federica Mogherini, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and head of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's Joint Commission, has said that Europeans are united in maintaining the deal even if the United States backs out.

Or what if Trump carries out his threat, issued at the United Nations two weeks ago, "to totally destroy North Korea"? Will other countries support this decision? Signs point to no.

There is reason even to doubt the president's knack for rallying his base here in the United States, which calls into question his ability to implement foreign policies that might be controversial, or defy the conventional wisdom. In the GOP primary in Alabama, the president endorsed Sen. Luther Strange. His followers chose the challenger, former judge Roy Moore.

It isn't obvious that the president interprets it that way, or that he could change course even if he did. But faced with the reality that he cannot convince or cajole others to do as he wishes, he may reach for the one instrument that he, and he alone, controls: the power of the U.S. military to destroy.

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