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Abstract

Systemic racism continues to plague Black Americans. However, demonstrations that attempt to bring attention to racial discrimination are often met with anger from white Americans that claim oppression on the basis of race is no longer an issue. Former NFL athlete Colin Kaepernick is no exception to this trend and his peaceful protests during the national anthem led to a swift denunciation and his eventual dismissal from the league. Consequently, the NFL's treatment of Kaepernick is reflective of a larger issue in American society where any person or organization that attempts to challenge the racial hierarchy, is vilified.

Keywords

Social Justice, Colin Kaepernick, institutionalized discrimination

Disciplines

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Comments

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American Society's Fear of Social Change Reflected through the Ostracizing of NFL Free Agent Colin Kaepernick

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When Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in 1966, they were met with fierce opposition from local law enforcement and the federal government. Specifically, police officers repeatedly arrested the Party's members, forcing them to divert resources away from their charitable programs towards legal fees. Moreover, the FBI attempted to turn corporations against the Black Panthers in order to reduce the Party's funding (Jones 1988, pp. 423-425). It appears odd that the FBI would devote countless hours to suppressing an organization whose goal was to fight for affordable and decent housing and to end police brutality. However, the root of their mission, uplifting a marginalized Black community, invoked a deep-seated fear in the federal government, causing FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to label the Black Panther Party as the "number one threat to the security of the United States" (Jones, 1988, p. 416). The notion of altering the status quo of white privilege, which has pervaded every element of society since the inception of the nation, is often met with extreme resentment. Moreover, even though many individuals would adamantly deny that they subscribe to the ideology that there is a competition between different races, the dominant group worries that if one race ascends, in this case Black people, another group must descend, meaning white people.

Similarly, Colin Kaepernick challenged the same status quo as the Black Panthers when he first sat and then kneeled during the playing of the national anthem in the 2016-2017 NFL season. Consequently, he has not played a game for the league since. The National Football League has claimed that Kaepernick's unemployment is based on issues with his athletic performance; however, in reality, franchise owners refuse to hire a player that disrupts the social hierarchy, which places white Americans on top and pushes people of color to the bottom. As a result, the NFL's decision to shun Colin Kaepernick for his mission to strive for social justice

reflects a larger issue in American society where individuals who attempt to stimulate social change are oppressed and ridiculed.

The ostracizing of Colin Kaepernick began on August 26th, 2016 during a pre-season game against the Green-Bay Packers when he chose to sit as the Star-Spangled Banner played. Kaepernick stated that his decision to not stand for the national anthem stemmed from not wanting to “show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color” (Schmidt et al. 2018). Furthermore, by sitting, he symbolically protested widespread police brutality against minorities. After discussing what method of protest would be most considerate of U.S servicemen and women with former Green Beret and NFL player Nate Boyer, Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the national anthem for the rest of the 2016-2017 season.

However, the narrative surrounding Colin Kaepernick was not centered on the principles for which he was fighting; rather, conversations focused on whether or not he was disrespecting the United States and its military. Likewise Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones wrote a letter stating that any player who protested during the national anthem would be designated as inactive because they must “respect the flag” if they were going to play for his team (Brinson 2017). Moreover, in 2017, President Donald Trump both tweeted and stated on a national news broadcast that the NFL should have suspended Kaepernick for kneeling during the anthem in order to permanently stop him from disrespecting the nation (Wilson, 2017). Both influential businessmen failed to acknowledge the reasons behind Colin Kaepernick’s protests and instead claimed that Kaepernick and any other player that did not stand for the national anthem were intentionally insulting the United States. By contrast, Kaepernick actually displayed his commitment to the future of the United States by striving to improve the quality of life for oppressed Americans. Not once has he said that he despises the country in which he lives; rather,

he sees the problems in American society that are often ignored, but still believes that awareness can change the standard of white privilege. He utilized the legal rights afforded to him as an American citizen, including freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, as well as the power of his fame to convey his support for oppressed Americans whose civil rights are repeatedly trampled upon. Additionally, Colin Kaepernick ensured that he was protesting in a manner that was most respectful to the people that serve in the United States military and give him the ability to publicly share his views, no matter how unpopular, through their undeniable sacrifices.

Assertions that the United States has somehow been absolved of all racial inequalities since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s originates in the transition from de jure segregation in the form of slavery and Jim Crow laws to more subtle forms of oppression. Many still view racially motivated attacks as violent encounters, such as in 1965 when state troopers beat peaceful protesters calling for an end to racial discrimination as they marched in Selma, Alabama (Klein, 2015). In Kaepernick's case, he led the 49ers to a Super Bowl, two NFC Championship games, and holds the 5th-best touchdown to interception ratio of all time, yet he went unsigned after becoming a free agent after the 2016-2017 season; the same year that he began kneeling for the national anthem (Reid, 2017). Even though Kaepernick was not physically assaulted, the decision by NFL teams to shun Colin Kaepernick and collectively prevent his employment illustrate that powerful institutions still have the means to forcibly suppress peaceful protests. Consequently, his performance on the field was not the prevailing factor in the teams' decisions to leave him unsigned. Instead of targeting his physical body, the oppressors have prevented Kaepernick from being on the field, so that his protests are not aired for the world to see.

By reducing Kaepernick's visibility and taking away his means of income, the NFL attempted to discourage other players from engaging in similar protests relating to racial inequality. Their repressive actions bring up the disturbing notion of how far the United States has really come since the days of Selma. Protesters are now being suppressed under new "colorblind" policies adopted by companies like the NFL, which allow for racial discrimination to thrive under a different, more tolerable name. Accordingly, the NFL is able to claim that it is the prerogative of the individual teams to sign the players they want, and it is difficult to prove in a legal setting that their decision is based on anything besides talent. Consequently, the suppression does not garner the same repudiation from the general public because it is not an event that can be broadcast, and it does not capture the bloodshed and terror that protestors have previously endured. However, shutting Colin Kaepernick out of the NFL serves the same purpose as the police intimidating protestors with the threat of physical violence.

Furthermore, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell eventually sent an official statement to all 32 teams in 2017, claiming to empathize with the motives behind the protests but made it clear that the NFL "believe[s] that everyone should stand for the National Anthem [sic]" in order "to honor [the] flag and [the] country" (Skiver, 2017). Also, he even stated that the kneeling is "a barrier to having honest conversations and making real progress on the underlying issues," implying that the protests have no merit and have only encouraged divisiveness (Skiver, 2017). Goodell attempted to appear concerned over the social justice issues that Kaepernick and other players were trying to bring to the forefront, yet he too turned the protests into a conversation about loyalty to the United States, just as Jones and Trump did. The NFL claimed that it supports the players' rights to protest, but their passive-aggressive statements prove that they do not approve of their decisions. Namely, Goodell emphasized the fans' antagonistic reactions to the

protests as evidence that players are not achieving their goals of equality. However, Goodel's concern over the fans' beliefs is not that it would potentially hurt the fight for social justice but rather that it would negatively impact ratings and, consequently, profit for the league. If the NFL was actually concerned with Kaepernick's mission, they would have stated in their letter that the protests have the ability to spark new conversations about racial inequality in the United States. Instead, the NFL contributed to the broken ideology that kneeling during the national anthem is an act of treason rather than an opportunity for honest discussion.

In relation to the driving factors behind the passionate fan response to Colin Kaepernick's protests, American football viewers see the game as a reflection of their cultural values (Schmidt et al. 2018). Consequently, fans interpret it as a personal attack when a player speaks out against social norms and attempts to create change. Not surprisingly, the fan reaction was swift and severe in opposition to Kaepernick, going as far as publicly burning his 49ers jersey, using his jersey as a doormat, and sending him death threats (Schmidt et al. 2018). Furthermore, a 2018 Wall Street Journal poll revealed that 62% of white Americans say his kneeling is "not appropriate," and, even more strikingly, 82% of Donald Trump voters called the protests inappropriate (Dann, 2018). Conversely, 70% of Black Americans did not see the kneeling protests as inappropriate.

Notably, a study by Schmidt et al. (2018) analyzed public Facebook posts about Colin Kaepernick and found that the vast majority of the content centered around Kaepernick's alleged anti-American stance and the idea that racial segregation and oppression are no longer an issue in the United States. Users repeatedly called for Kaepernick to leave the country because they believed that he does not appreciate the benefits associated with being a part of American society. Notably, one person stated that Kaepernick should "do [all Americans] a favor and get

out of the country that has made [him] rich” (Schmidt et al. 2018). Evidently, there is a prevailing trend that if an individual speaks out about an issue they recognize in the United States, especially ones concerning racial inequity, they are labeled as ungrateful. However, ridiculing and shaming social justice advocates undermines the mission of social change for the benefit of all Americans. Also, appreciating the privileges associated with living in a developed nation like the United States does not equate to blind nationalism. By contrast, ignoring the societal problems that still persist serves to cripple not only social but also economic and political progress. Moreover, it reveals the unsettling truth that a significant portion of the country is not willing to move forward with dismantling de facto segregation and deracinating racial profiling.

Additionally, many comments focused on refuting Colin Kaepernick’s entire social justice platform, claiming that discrimination ended with slavery and that those who say otherwise are the ones preventing the country from moving beyond racism. Specifically, one person stated that “[o]ppression is a myth propagated by people like . . . Colin [Kaepernick]” (Schmidt et al. 2018). Furthermore, some users resorted to using unsubstantiated statistics to prove that racism is no longer an issue in the United States such as “[w]hen 70% of the people who get arrested are black, in cities where 70% of the population is black, that is not racial profiling; it is the Law of Probability” (Schmidt et al. 2018). In reality, youth of color are disproportionately arrested for the same drug crimes that white youth commit even though they are no more likely to use drugs than white people (Alexander, 2010, p. 118). Strikingly, an analysis of police activity in Seattle found that black drug dealers were significantly more likely to be arrested than white dealers even when both were active in the same area, indicating that black criminals were sought out by law enforcement (Alexander, 2010, p. 127). The users’

ignorance of the existing racial inequalities in American society and their dismissive attitudes towards the genuine struggles of oppressed minorities illustrate their fear of social justice advocates and the progress that can potentially be made in dismantling white privilege. Kaepernick's goal of reducing the disparities between the treatment of white people and people of color threatens the long-standing social hierarchy that favors white people over all others. Consequently, the users deny the obvious racial issues in the United States in order to cover up their unrest over losing their inherent entitlements that are granted to them at birth based solely on the color of their skin.

Considering that the United States itself arose out of war against a tyrannical government that revolutionaries claimed was unjust, Colin Kaepernick's protest should be met with a showering of patriotic support. Furthermore, history textbooks and popular vernacular portray the rebels from the American Revolution as heroes for fighting for what they believed was right. As a result, Kaepernick should be praised for standing up for those that do not have the means to call attention to the oppression and exploitation they experience on a daily basis. However, he is spoken of as if he is a villain threatening the foundations of society, a foundation that was actually built on racial inequality. Only when there is a perception of a competition between the dominant class and marginalized people are leaders of righteous causes transformed into an enemy. White Americans that claim Colin Kaepernick no longer deserves to live in the United States unveil their unease at the possibility of changing the society that endows them with advantages that they know they have not earned.

Interestingly, other famous athletes that have spoken about social justice issues, such as LeBron James and Dwyane Wade, continue to receive the support and adoration of fans. Specifically, James and Wade along with other popular NBA stars Carmelo Anthony and Chris

Paul appeared at the 2016 ESPY Awards, a live-broadcast sports award show created by ESPN. In light of the recent murder of Philando Castile, an African-American man who was shot by a police officer after being pulled over for broken brake lights, they gave a speech centered on “the injustice, distrust and anger that plague so many” black and brown people (Chan, 2016). At the same time, they were careful to mention “the hundreds of thousands of great [police] officers serving [the] country” and stated that “the retaliation has to stop” (Chan, 2016). Their decision to highlight the perspective of both marginalized communities and law enforcement in a speech about racial injustice displays their desire to deliver the least offensive message possible. As a result, their goal was likely to appeal to the broadest audience, including the oppressed that witness and experience discrimination on a daily basis, sympathizers of the police, and those who view racially motivated violence as infrequent and exaggerated.

By contrast, when Colin Kaepernick speaks about racial injustice, he is unapologetic about the rampant hypocrisy he sees in American society and does not attempt to soften his tone about the epidemic of police brutality and institutionalized discrimination. Notably, rather than preface his call to end the shooting of people of color by stating that there are many upright police officers, he simply states that “there are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (ESPN, 2016). Consequently, those that already stand with the decisions of law enforcement are angered by his blunt assessments. Moreover, while James and Wade prefer to fight discrimination through their charitable organizations and their carefully chosen words, Kaepernick takes it a step further by peacefully protesting the American flag. As a result, casual observers of the struggle for racial justice focus on Kaepernick’s alleged disrespect for the nation and laud James and Wade for their ability to help their oppressed communities while still remaining civil. Additionally, deniers of racial inequalities label Kaepernick as the

anti-American while tolerating James and Wade's activism. Consequently, Kaepernick distinguishes himself from other athletes that engage in social activism due to not only his physical demonstrations, but also his message for justice rather than unity. Primarily, Kaepernick does not try to join all Americans together into one content family. Rather, he strives to bring the issues of marginalized people to the forefront, no matter how much his reputation is harmed.

Similarly to James and Wade, the sporting company Nike has supported the fight for racial equality while still maintaining the approval of the majority of mainstream American society. However, Nike is especially hypocritical when it comes to their stance on Colin Kaepernick and his battle with the NFL. The powerhouse corporation created the advertisement "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just Do It," narrated by Colin Kaepernick in 2018. Although Nike risked alienating consumers that take personal offense to Kaepernick's protests, Nike has yet to take a direct stand against the NFL, which has attempted to suppress Kaepernick's social justice mission (Abad-Santos, 2018). Not surprisingly, Nike recently re-signed an apparel contract with the NFL through 2028 to supply all jerseys with a prominently featured Nike swoosh on the left bicep (Garcia, 2018). Consequently, Nike appears to unanimously endorse Kaepernick and his mission, yet they do not follow through on the words of their own campaign.

Rather than risk the immense amount of money they earn through their NFL partnership by publicly criticizing the league for barring Kaepernick from playing and calling out the NFL for their lack of support for social justice advocates, Nike hides behind Kaepernick's clear sacrifice. The company has not been willing to jeopardize its future relationship with the NFL; instead, they have taken a position so that they can profit from not only their NFL contract, but also Colin Kaepernick's anthem controversy. By airing a commercial featuring Kaepernick

without directly mentioning the NFL, Nike has been able to appeal to supporters of the kneeling protests without angering the opponents of Kaepernick within the league. Moreover, the commercial does not show or even mention the racial justice issues that Kaepernick protests when he kneels. In fact, as opposed to taking a financial hit after broadcasting the potentially controversial advertisement, Nike's market value has increased by 6 billion in the past year (Abad-Santos, 2018). Evidently, Nike has mastered the art of supporting socially progressive movements while still preserving its ties to conservative backers.

Although Nike has taken a fairly neutral stance on Colin Kaepernick and his fight against the NFL, they have still given him a public platform that allows him to remain relevant. By contrast, the aforementioned Black Panther Party lost the majority of their influence within five years of their founding due to external repression by the state and federal governments (Jones, 1988, p. 420). The Black Panthers did not have the technological advances that Colin Kaepernick and other social activists have been able to utilize in the 21st century, including social media apps such as Twitter and Instagram and online newspaper articles that can quickly reach a national audience. As a result, the Party was not able to convey the injustice that they were experiencing, and they could not rebuild their image quickly enough to ever regain their standing in the Black community and in the minds of the general American population.

In relation to Colin Kaepernick's situation, the NFL has not been able to successfully neutralize him due to his prominent presence in American society through numerous social media posts and national Nike campaigns. Moreover, the availability of information on the internet about Kaepernick's racial justice platform and the clear oppression he had experienced from the NFL owners prevents the league from successfully claiming that they support players' rights to protest and the ideas for which they are fighting. In terms of the public's opinions, the

defamation he faces further substantiates his point that racial issues continue to plague marginalized communities. In addition, Americans that call for Kaepernick's removal from the country due to his method of protesting cannot continue to ignore the social issues that he brings into the limelight because there is no denying what has been present in the foundation of American society since its establishment.

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