

The Flag, the Protests, and Finding Some Common Ground (The NFL on REO Special Edition)

[Last week on The NFL on REO](#), I highlighted a few areas where the NFL needs change. While it was not my intention to use an entire article to deal with any one of those issues, sometimes events and cultural conversations become too large to handle in a paragraph or two. As most everyone is aware, over the weekend, President Trump made some very pointed and controversial comments about national anthem protestors in the NFL. The NFL and its players responded forcefully on Sunday during the games. That is the immediate context. The larger context is much more complicated.

Generally, I try to stay away from a few topics when I write about the NFL and the Titans. I avoid politics as much as possible. I avoid religion as well, for similar reasons. The majority of people that read articles about the NFL want to read about just that – the NFL. They don't want another political screed, diatribe, or pontification. I hope this is not that. But, this topic is so big, so intense, and so interconnected with the sport I love the most, I feel it would be a massive oversight on my part to completely avoid it.

Instead of simply writing down my thoughts on this issue, which are tangled and not entirely coherent, I decided to bring some of the other REO writers to the table for a conversation. Joining me today are Gowdy Cannon and my brother, David Lytle. Hopefully, something said here will help those of you that are struggling with making sense of all of this.

Phill: To kick things off, I want to lay down some groundwork. First, I believe I speak for everyone at REO that the NFL players have a right to speak out and stand up for issues they are passionate about. Second, there are injustices in our country that need to be confronted, addressed, and corrected. And finally, this weekend was a mess.

Prior to this weekend, what did you think about the limited anthem protests that have been happening in the NFL for the past few years?

Gowdy:

Prior to this weekend my thoughts towards the protests were very mixed. My very first reaction was that the time, place and manner were unwise and that instead of creating dialogue and awareness, they only further divided the country along racial and political lines and brought about a new angle of racial justice promoters vs. Veterans and not just police. At first, I thought, that can only be a bad thing.

Yet at the same time I never for one second thought Kaepernick or anyone else should be disciplined or muted and especially not fired. Because of US history and current politics, I felt that could be yet another step to dividing us. I think the protesters need to be heard.

And as I have read and listened to people like Benjamin Watson, Lecrae, John Perkins and a whole host of others on racial issues in the United States, the more sympathetic I have felt towards the message behind the kneeling and I had changed my perception of it greatly. It may be divisive but I think I have to believe that either wise, Christian black people are way off on this, or that attention desperately needs to be brought to racial injustice in the US in 2017. I do not believe the former is correct. For that reason, I think it is worth making some people mad to start the national

discussion. Surely some people will never change their minds. But some, like me, will.

I had some disagreement towards Kaepernick and Michael Bennett for reasons that were not specifically related to kneeling. But the act itself to me was something I would not condemn.

Phill:

I had a similar reaction Gowdy. If the NFL allows this sort of protest, which actually goes against the operations policy it distributes to each team, then these players have a right to kneel, or sit, or raise their hand. I have no problem with any of that. I'm not sure how much good it does in the long run, considering most fans didn't agree with the protests, but it was their right to do it. My biggest issue stemmed from Kaepernick's comments after his protest started and some of the other things he said, did, or the clothing he wore – police as pigs on his clothing. He made positive comments about Fidel Castro, which were ill-informed at best, and that completely ruined his credibility among many, myself included.

The issue was dying down. Most of the players that had protested with Kaepernick at the beginning had moved on to other ways of bringing awareness to what they saw as racial inequality in our country – one-half of one percent of the players were still protesting. The protests were going to be mostly gone, probably this season. And then Trump happened.

This has the potential to be a source of debate with our readers, but I don't believe Trump acted wisely by saying what he did. In fact, it all feels very opportunistic and calculating. Trump gets beaten up on a daily basis by the media, unlike any other president I have seen in my lifetime. He is criticized for things he deserves and for things he does not. The media reacts to him like a petulant, angry, child would. So Trump occasionally makes comments where he knows he has the majority behind him – and he does on this issue. [Most people dislike the anthem protests](#). His most rabid supporters

hate the protests. Many of them have already turned their back on the NFL. He was preaching to the choir on this one and he knew it would ignite a firestorm because that is how he likes to operate. And the media played right into his hand, as we all knew they would because that is who they are.

So, I guess my question is, how do we deal with this? How do we condemn what Trump said but still understand the anger and the frustration many Americans feel when they see wealthy athletes kneeling or “disrespecting” the flag, the country, and the anthem? And how do we do all of those things while acknowledging that there are real problems with injustice in our country?

David:

It is a shame that Trump is bringing a new level racial tension and political division into America’s favorite sport. By having such strong and vulgar words aimed at NFL players, he made standing for the National Anthem a referendum on his presidency, when it was just a side issue having to do with basically one former player. He backed NFL players as a whole into a corner and forced the issue. When bullied, people punch back. I was not upset with the Titans for staying in the locker room. It seemed like a respectful way to let the president know that he shouldn’t bully. It won’t do any good, because its Trump, but it was an effort. An effort that did not infuriate me as much as the President’s words, but still bothered me deeply.

Gowdy:

I will echo you guys that Trump’s comments Friday were a disaster as far as national dialogue and unity. It is incomprehensible to me that a US president would speak using those words, as loudly as possible, completely unashamed. Other presidents have definitely helped divide us but the whole spectacle was unprecedented in delivery and pejorative, at least in my lifetime. I’m not one who gets outraged about everything any president does or says, but I am still stunned

by the comments. My sympathies for the kneelers are at an all-time high as a result.

I don't have many answers. Something that I have seen good, balanced Christians post to social media (that often gets drowned out) is James 1:19. As a Christian, I absolutely should be slow to speak, slow to anger and quick to listen. Yet this is so poorly practiced, by me and others quite often. But thanks to godly people in my personal life and on social media, I am trying to get better at it. I want to listen when Tim Scott, the only black Republican senator in the US, says that he had been stopped by police seven times in a year for driving a nice car and no other reason. I want to listen to Ben Watson when he says there is a fear in the black community of the police. I want to listen to an unnamed friend that talks about how they once had a gun pulled on them by police for playing their music loudly while driving. A good friend just lent me a book by "Coach" Wayne Gordon, a pastor in Chicago, called Do All Lives Matter? I read it in a day. It helps me want to live out James 1:19

I don't have to agree with everything someone says to listen to them. But I will not argue with a non-white on this topic, especially if they speak of their experience. Data can be argued but I will not even do that because I personally feel that is counterproductive in most cases. Others may feel differently and that is fine. This is a topic and a time for me to practice James 1:19. At the very minimum, I wish people would stop talking in cliches and posting and tweeting without trying to understand others. Especially face to face. (Tim Scott and others have launched a huge movement of inviting other races into each other's homes for Sunday lunch. Let's do this, people!)

However, I am not a veteran or a cop and if I were I may feel differently. I can only imagine what it is like to be in battle and view the flag as a source of pride. I can only imagine because I've never been in battle. Right now I remain

convinced it is worth the controversy because many veterans and cops support the kneeling and because many protestors have tried to be clear that people will not listen unless we go to extremes sometimes and they truly mean no disrespect to the flag, veterans or policemen. Based on US history, I personally am not comfortable constantly telling black people or other races or ethnicities how and when they should peacefully protest.

Phill:

I don't disagree with any of that. I completely agree that dialogue is important. Listening is important. Empathy is important. We do too little of all those things. We are quick to speak and quick to anger and very slow to listen. Here comes the but...

We could spend hours and way too many words discussing the validity of these protests. We could talk about statistics, evidence, facts, and all those other things. I'm not really interested in that and I am definitely not qualified to speak intelligently about it. I want to keep this focused on the NFL, Trump, and how everyone can do a better job of having this public debate.

As David said, there has to be a better way to do this. And this is not saying minorities need to find less uncomfortable ways to protest. I would simply urge people to find wiser ways to protest – ways that will not give off the appearance of disrespect for our nation. They are less likely to change minds when you start from a position that puts people on the defensive.

The fact is, for too many, this protest is attacking everything they think the flag and the anthem stand for. For too many, these NFL players are showing contempt and disrespect for the flag and our country. These people will never be able to see past this form of protest. To them, it feels completely un-American. Kaepernick's original comments

were very pointed in their criticisms of the US. Too pointed for many. And they made it clear that he was showing contempt for the flag and the nation because he felt the nation was showing contempt for minorities.

And for people who agree with Trump, the NFL has only further confirmed in their mind that it is full of players that hate our country. I believe the overwhelming majority of these players love their country and meant no disrespect to the flag or anthem this weekend. But that is not how many people see it. And a productive conversation on this issue will never happen if we are starting on such polar opposite ends.

Without sacrificing their voice and their position, what can NFL players, the league, and the owners do to make their statements without alienating, angering, and inflaming millions of fans? And what can fans do to listen and understand what is truly being said through these protests?

David:

At the end of the day (or beginning of the game), kneeling for the anthem or even staying in the locker room is counterproductive. Perhaps attention is called to an area needing reform, but players can do a lot of good with their money and influence in ways that don't make the nation think they hate their country. The flag and our national song about it, however, stand for the ideals of this nation, not the problems. The first and greatest of those ideals is that "all men are created equal." Those who cannot stand up for this ideal are either tragically uninformed (like Kaepernick) or worse (like the dictator on his T-shirt).

I think Trump has been wanting to get back at the NFL going all the way back to his days as a USFL owner days. He resented being excluded from their club and now he is using his power to revive a dead issue and forcing the nation into a false dichotomy—Boycott the NFL or hate America. I won't be Trumped.

Gowdy:

*The events of this past weekend are still fresh so this is a quick reaction and could easily be ignorant in hindsight, but...is it too idealistic to think what the Cowboys did is a reasonable alternative? If you missed it they knelt as a team, including coaches, staff and even Jerry Jones, **before** the anthem. Could this still bring awareness and yet placate many veterans and others who feel that honoring the flag and anthem are important? Again, my first reaction says it could work. But I also know if you try to please everyone you often please no one. I know there were boos by the Cardinal fans, though they could have been just a knee-jerk reaction/assumption without realizing what the Cowboys were actually doing. Or could be that they were just booing the Cowboys! And I can theorize on the other side some protesters still feeling silenced or unheard or feeling that kneeling before the anthem totally misses the point.*

So I don't know. Just some raw thoughts mere days after the incidents.

Phill:

My suggestions would be pretty simple: Listen more, react less. And while you are at it, ignore the media as much as possible. Don't allow the media or the fringes to frame the issue. Those that are angry about the protests are not all racists and white supremacists. Those that are protesting are not all anti-American traitors. In fact, I would argue that there are very few on either side that fit those descriptions. There are real problems with equality and justice in our country – so even if we disagree on what those problems are or how widespread they are – we need to be willing to listen to people that feel strongly about them. And for those that are on the other side of the debate, be willing to empathize with those that don't see eye-to-eye with your position and be very careful about labeling them as racists or evil because of their differing perspective.

We are much closer on most of these issues than the media, Trump, etc... would have us believe. Having real conversations where we really listen will go a long way towards helping us see that.