

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION 5 on 45:

Protests, patriotism, and the history of black athletes in America

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings podcast network, analysis and commentary and Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

TURNER-LEE: Hello, I'm Nicole Turner Lee. I'm a fellow at the Center for Technology Innovation in Brookings Governance Studies program. And today I'd like to talk about what we're actually seeing with professional black athletes who are taking a knee to stand up against racial discrimination and brutality, and has become enthralled in this national debate about patriotism thanks to Donald Trump.

Last year, NFL player Colin Kaepernick took the knee to protest police brutality and social injustice. And this gesture of civil disobedience landed him alienated by the league that he's been unable to play in since that time. And as I mentioned just previously his actions have the country entangled in a national debate around patriotism.

As my colleague Andre Perry points out in his new blog about Trump's bullying of black athletes, these acts of civil disobedience are not new, and their expressions specifically by black professional athletes has a long history in our society. In the 1936 Berlin Olympics, despite being discriminated against in the U.S. track star Jesse Owens, one of the greatest Olympians of all time, took home four medals along with 17 other black athletes who were not only snubbed in Nazi Germany but also insulted by the racial discrimination they experience here at home. But he showed up. Despite having reservations about the ambiguity of his presence.

The greatest of all time boxer, Muhammad Ali, exercised firm opposition to the war. While some came out against his decision to snub the draft he shared and I quote, "why should me and other so-called Negroes go 10,000 miles away from home here in America to drop bombs and bullets on the other innocent brown people who have never bothered us?" Athletes such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos who raise their fists in silence over at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics in protest over racial discrimination at home.

There was the black 14 University of Wyoming football players that wore black armbands during a 1969 game against Brigham Young who was operated by the Mormon Church to protest the university's exclusion of black students from entering its priesthood. Let's not forget about 2001, when Serena Williams protested playing at the Indian Wells California Club at a prestigious tournament because the N-word was hurled at her while she was playing.

These countless acts of civil disobedience and economic shut down by the athletic community have been ongoing. But what makes this recent bout disturbing is the president's questioning of the patriotism of African-American players which can also be interpreted as an indictment on African-Americans overall, especially given his policies reversing civil rights.

When I hear this vitriol rhetoric I am directed to remember similar challenges at home and abroad but areas where we excelled. There were the Tuskegee Airmen who fought racism in the 1940s. Back then, white supremacist beliefs discourage the recruitment training and enlistment of black pilots because society thought they didn't have the skills or mental agility to succeed in the craft. But yet, when you hear from the surviving airmen you understand the pride that they still held despite it all with being an American.

Even when we fast forward to the incident with Kaepernick, who told press in 2016 "I am not going to stand up to show pride in the flag that oppresses black people and people of color," his conflict was more rooted in what W.E.B. Du Bois stated "early on in the souls of black folks the conflict of being Black and American, and being in a place where this unique contradiction pushes and pulls at the very existence of your loyalty."

Trump's explosive and inappropriate reference to black athletes as not loyal to this soil is very troubling and disingenuous. Yet it is expected, expected from a man who continues to unravel the civil rights and social justice policies and create those contradictions that exist within the American narrative.

While claims of black anti-patriotism are not new, neither are these powerful acts of civil disobedience and I want to remind the listeners about. What we're dealing with is a new problem of race in the 21st century which we will either have to speak to or ignore because it is not over in terms of what this conversation will look like.

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