

Trump's attack on black athletes in light of St. Louis' civil rights protests

Opinion

by William H. Freivogel

President Trump says his insistence NFL players stand for the national anthem brings Americans together. He claims race has nothing to do with his criticism of the black athletes.

Yet Trump's Twitter tirade has divided Americans on what the flag and national anthem represent and what constitutes true patriotism. Moreover, race has everything to do with the president's singling out black athletes and his insistence that team owners fire them for their uppity behavior.

Trump is not the first president to use the American flag or race as wedge issues. But he is the first president to regularly use his bully pulpit to bully American citizens who displease him.

Trump's "Twitter War" on black athletes is occurring at a time when St. Louisans are protesting police brutality, when the nation is celebrating the Little Rock 9 and when PBS is broadcasting a definitive history of the Vietnam War. Echoes of strife and racial injustice from half a century ago reverberate through today's events.

Today's civil rights protests are reminders of protests and police abuse during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, when most Americans approved of police beating demonstrators with nightsticks.

They're reminders of a time when veteran white journalists and politicians admonished Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. against the

March on Washington, predicting mayhem in the streets would damage prospects for the Civil Rights Act.

They're reminders of times when journalists and politicians failed to differentiate between violent and non-violent protests.

They're reminders of a time when a white woman with a kindly face could spit in the face of a young black student seeking an education in Little Rock.

They're reminders of a time when another president used patriotism and flag-waving to mobilize his Hard Hat supporters in the Silent Majority against young anti-war protesters.

They're reminders of a time when those who opposed the Vietnam War were viewed as unpatriotic, even though they thought patriotism required them to challenge their country when it was wrong.

Who owns the flag and patriotism?

Trump says a football player taking a knee during the national anthem makes that athlete a "son of a bitch," unpatriotic and disrespectful of the military.

But since when do the flag and the National Anthem belong only to flag-wavers and the military? Since when do they represent only those Americans who salute? Don't these national symbols also represent the dissenters, the protesters, the war critics, and, yes, even those who burn the flag in protest?

Bob Costas, the sports broadcaster who got a start in St. Louis, put it well.

"This is no disrespect to the military," he said. "Martin Luther King was a patriot. Susan B. Anthony was a patriot. Dissidents are patriots. School teachers and social workers are patriots. Patriotism comes in many forms and what has happened is that it's been conflated with a bumper sticker-

style kind of flag-waving and with the military only, so that people cannot see that in his own way Colin Kaepernick, however imperfectly, is doing a patriotic thing. And so too are some of these other players.”

Nothing to do with race?

Despite the White House claim the president’s tweets have nothing to do with race, Kaepernick has explicitly said he is protesting the mistreatment of African-Americans and people of color by predominantly white police forces.

Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions may think there is no problem with the way police treat minority communities, but events in St. Louis show otherwise.

For almost two weeks protesters have demonstrated against a judge’s decision to acquit former St. Louis Police Officer Jason Stockley of murder in the death of African-American suspect Anthony Lamar Smith. They also have demonstrated against the larger issues of racial injustice that have long persisted in this land of Dred Scott.

The judge may have been legally justified in concluding there was “reasonable doubt” of Stockley’s guilt on the murder charge, just as a grand jury may have been legally correct in deciding not to prosecute Officer Darren Wilson for the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. After all, it is a victory for civil rights when the judicial system protects the liberty of someone scorned in the streets.

Still, both police killings and the way the militarized police violated the First Amendment rights of citizens and journalists during the ensuing protests show there are much bigger civil rights issues at stake – that St. Louis and the nation have a long way before achieving equality.

Too many times police escalate confrontations with suspects as Stockley did during the high-speed chase through St. Louis

streets, as Wilson did in stopping Brown for jaywalking, as New York police did with the deadly choke-hold on Eric Garner for selling illegal cigarettes and as Cleveland police did when they killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice as he held a starter pistol in a park.

And too many times police, in responding to mostly peaceful civil-rights protests, ignore the rights of people to protest in public places. The “kettling,” or herding of protesters in downtown St. Louis on the Sunday after the not-guilty verdict, was a blatant example of St. Louis police officers defiantly violating the constitutional rights of protesters. Police failed to warn non-violent demonstrators they were involved in an illegal assembly, instead surrounding them, refusing to let them leave the area and then using chemical agents while arresting them.

If the Justice Department were doing its job – as it did during the Obama administration – it would have launched a “pattern or practice” investigation of St. Louis police practices. The Obama Justice Department’s investigation of Ferguson police and municipal courts found long-standing and egregiously unconstitutional practices.

The Justice Department has the power and responsibility to conduct this kind of police investigation as a result of a law passed because of the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991. But Sessions and Trump are not enforcing the law.

The pattern and practice of the Trump presidency is undeniable: From the Obama birther claim, to branding illegal immigrants as rapists, to pardoning Sheriff Joe Arpaio, to equivocation in the face of Nazis and white supremacists, to a demand that ESPN fire a black commentator, to the weekend war on black athletes.

Perhaps Colin Kaepernick has a patriotic point to make when he

kneels on the field to bring attention to America's unfulfilled promise.