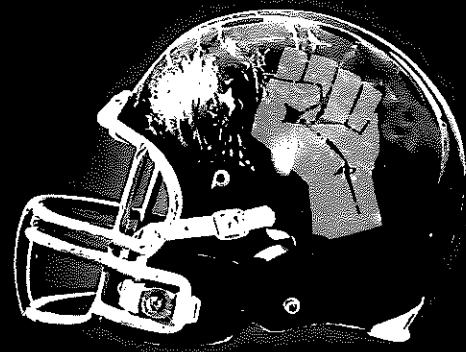

THE HERITAGE



**BLACK ATHLETES,
A DIVIDED AMERICA,
AND THE POLITICS
OF PATRIOTISM**

HOWARD BRYANT

"It may make people uncomfortable, but I'm pleased that Howard Bryant has chosen to tell the story of our heritage, and even more pleased that there are still ballplayers today who are willing to stand up for what they think is right." —HENRY AARON, Major League Baseball Hall of Famer

“WHO IS THE PATRIOT?”

A patriot has universal values, standards by which he judges his nation, always wishing it well, and wishing it would do better.

—TIMOTHY SNYDER, *On Tyranny*

MAYBE IT WAS ALL THE COMMERCIALS, well-intentioned and heart-breaking, of wounded soldiers and foundations. Or maybe it was the insistence at every turn that the paying customer acknowledge, multiple times in multiple ways, the generic umbrella of “the troops” without going beyond the photo op. Even little kids at baseball games couldn’t run the bases after games without paying homage to some military-soldier tie-in. Maybe it was the smothering corporate influence on gestures that felt orchestrated. Maybe it was every jersey, for every occasion, being sold in a desert camo version, along with camo caps and coffee mugs. Or maybe it was just that good old-fashioned American bullshit detector that came out when we were having too much of one thing crammed down our throats with no counterbalancing criticism that made it all feel just a little bit off. It was all of the above, naturally, the overdone deference, the ubiquity of soldiers while erasing the word “war,” being treated like a traitor just for voicing an opinion, the nonstop commercial milking of 9/11 sentiment nearly *twenty years* after the Twin Towers fell.

Then came the day when all the dissenters, the ones who fought and the ones who didn’t, the ones who were pissed off when after 9/11 the president told America not to sacrifice but to shop, and the ones who didn’t even *want* to be called dissenters but were nevertheless offended

that it looked like sports teams were using the military for optics but not jobs, finally saw the numbers on the page. It was a bitter vindication and a swift punch in the gut. You could run or sit and take it, but the truth wasn't going anywhere: so much of the patriotism at the ballpark was a deception, part of a big hoax.

On November 4, 2015, US senators John McCain and Jeff Flake, both of Arizona, released a report titled *Tackling Paid Patriotism*, which in 150 pages detailed what was really behind the rituals Americans had become accustomed to in sports after September 11, from American flags across the fifty-yard line to all those soldiers at the games to the heart-wrenching surprise homecoming ceremonies at halftime. The report came to a devastating conclusion: These weren't home-grown, selfless shows of support for the troops by the local team on board with local soldiers. This was about money. Sports teams had been charging the military to stage their events at ballparks, and the Pentagon had been paying the teams millions in taxpayer money—at least \$6.8 million, to that point—to do it.

And just as the Justice Department's 585-page *Federal Report on Police Killings* revealed routine violations of the Constitution and of the rights of primarily black citizens across the country, *Tackling Paid Patriotism* did not originate from some commie think tank or the Bernie Sanders wing of America. It came from two conservative Republican senators from a state that had voted Democrat in a general election exactly once since 1952. People could say what they wanted about John McCain, but you had to be a ghoul to question his service credentials.

The surprise homecoming ceremonies at halftime? Staged. The throwing out of the first pitch by a returning soldier?

A deception.

"It is time to allow major sports teams' legitimate tributes to our soldiers to shine with national pride," the report read, "rather than being cast under the pallor of marketing gimmicks paid for by American taxpayers."

When the report was released, McCain and Flake connected the dots the public wouldn't. The dissenters who saw state-sponsored nationalism at the games were no longer easily dismissed as conspiracy theorists but rather as rightfully insulted citizens. What had happened? The Army National Guard, air force, and navy, especially, had clearly been watching what sports had become in the years following 9/11 and, combined with

falling enlistment rates, saw an opportunity. Before 2009, NFL players often remained in the locker room during the national anthem. Afterward, the secret embedding began, deceiving fans into thinking NFL teams were supporting the military because individual owners believed it was the right thing to do. It was, in fact, a deception that permeated virtually every sporting event in the country. There was no taxpayer money for schools or roads, but there was \$280,000 for the Massachusetts Army National Guard to sponsor Boston Bruins Military Appreciation Night. Now it made sense why a team like the Yankees would try to have a guy removed from the ballpark for not playing along with the patriotism game. The Wisconsin Army National Guard in 2014 paid the Milwaukee Brewers \$80,000 for military perks, and during every Sunday home game, and this wasn't a misprint, \$49,000 was the price tag to sing "God Bless America."

The Brewers Military Appreciation Day was no organic outpouring of the home team doing the right thing to support the troops. The team charged the National Guard \$10,000 for a "promotion to recognize soldiers and their families and provide 12 vendor passes during each of four Brewers home games," strategic plants for the crowd shots of the armed forces at the ballpark. The Brewers charged \$7,500 for the honor of a service member throwing out the first pitch.

So, when racecar driver Richard Petty came out to see the troops, signature cowboy hat and all, to shake hands and thank the men and women for keeping the country safe, it was a fraud. In 2015, the Air Force paid NASCAR \$1.56 million for the racing star's grip-and-grins that made everybody bleed red, white, and blue.

They were all in on it: NASCAR, MLB, the NBA, the NFL, NHL, MLS, and the NCAA. The military was using sports to sell the business of war. And the teams? Well, they were in the business of making money—and you could make even more money if it looked like you were acting out of a sense of duty. And there were, as is always the case, unintended consequences to this little game: what was happening at the ballpark was splitting the country apart, by forcing an ersatz patriotism on the public. Unwitting fans arrived to stadiums across the country believing their favorite sports teams were genuine in their concern for servicemen and -women. While sports and the military may have been using one another—the armed forces to buy support for the wars and recruit soldiers, the teams to buy goodwill from the public, open up marketing

opportunities, and force the players into an obedient position—the fans were being used as well.

If the military wasn't being used because it willfully targeted sports to recruit and burnish its image, then the individual soldiers were being manipulated by its military and the corporate power of sports as shields against dissent. Soldiers were Americans who joined the armed forces for a host of reasons, usually out of the desire to improve themselves economically and educationally, were distorted into a class of monolithic super-patriots whose only mission was to obey their government. A polarized climate turned soldiers into political pawns, the guise of patriotism used to mask the lack of economic choices that prompted their enlistment.

So much of this deception came back to Pat Tillman, whose enlistment served in part as a catalyst for the Department of Defense to hone in on sports at a potentially fruitful recruiting ground. His death and its subsequent cover-up by the army magnified this subsequent twisting of reality for the sake of propaganda. Was everything about this period a cynical ruse for profit?

"What's so disturbing is that the Bush administration used Pat Tillman in death in a way that he would not allow them to use him in life. He refused all efforts for the Pentagon to turn him into G.I. Joe or for a recruitment poster at a time when recruitment was dropping dramatically," the *Nation's* Dave Zirin said. "Then in death, this government lied to his family about how he died. They held a nationally televised funeral, and they lied about the matter of his death over his grave. It wasn't a funeral. It was a desecration. The family tried for years to find out the truth about his death. And even though NFL owners are some of the most politically connected people in this country, and even though they have a Pat Tillman jersey encased in glass at the NFL offices, they have not lifted one single solitary finger to help his family get the truth."

When McCain and Flake's report was released, the sports leagues were alternately embarrassed and enraged. The NFL promised to return some of the money. MLB didn't like looking as though it was ripping off the public. The baseball argument was that yes, teams were charging the military to hold a promotion, but the dollar amounts were at such a discounted rate that it amounted to a giveaway, and McCain and Flake's report was unfairly distorting them. It wasn't as if teams were getting rich off the military. (So what if the air force paid the Dallas Stars hockey

team \$10,000 for season tickets and "promotional rights"?) Of course, the real benefit to teams wasn't from whatever check the Pentagon sent over but from the embedding of military into the minds and wallets of the customer.

"Look, they shouldn't be paying the NFL. That is corruption, any way you call it," Lieutenant General Russel Honoré said. "Somewhere along the line, one of these contract agencies, ad agency, or some retired dude said, 'We could get the Army to pay us if we let them carry the flag out.' Or 'We could get the Marines to pay us if we allow them to take the flag out.' Everything gets screwed up if we're not doing our jobs and holding ourselves accountable, but I don't think the military ought to be paying to participate."

Now fans could feel like they were part of the effort, buying that \$250 camo jersey or coming to Military Appreciation Night instead of staying home or buying the \$25 desert camo hat with the pink logo for the ladies instead of a foam finger. The teams would also receive all kinds of shine for being patriotic when all they were doing was ripping off taxpayers and fooling their own fans at the ballpark. Most thought Bob ("We're all Patriots") Kraft was reaching into his own pocket when the team honored a member of the Massachusetts Army National Guard as part of its "True Patriot" program. Turns out, the Patriots charged the guard \$700,000 from 2012 to 2014 for the promotion. There was the air force, which in 2012 paid \$20,000 to perform a "full-field flag detail" at Indianapolis Colts home games.

On the football field, the baseball diamond, the hockey rink, the basketball court, and even the tennis court, the culture sold this message: the only people who deserved thanks or discounted tickets or who could be considered unquestionably American were the ones who carried the guns.

Even the optics were paid for, as all those crowd shots of our brave men and women in uniform taking in the game were included in the twenty grand: three hundred tickets for two home games a year. So, the soldiers may have been diehard football fans, but they were also plants. McCain and Flake's report offered a scathing admonition:

Consider this: honoring five Air Force officers put \$1,500 into the pockets of the LA Galaxy. In another example, taxpayers footed the \$10,000 bill for an on-field swearing-in ceremony with the World Series finalist

New York Mets. And the list goes on. By paying for such heartwarming displays like recognition of wounded warriors, surprise homecomings, and on-field enlistment ceremonies, these displays lost their luster. Unsuspecting audience members became the subjects of paid-marketing campaigns rather than simply bearing witness to teams' authentic, voluntary shows of support for the brave men and women who wear our nation's uniform. This not only betrays the sentiment and trust of fans, but casts an unfortunate shadow over the genuine patriotic partnerships that do so much for our troops, such as the National Football League's Salute to the Service campaign.

As tough as the report was, McCain pulled his punches because the NFL's Salute to Service, which he lauded, was just as bad. It was one of the biggest hoodwinks in sports, riddled with examples of the military paying for the ceremony—such as the Baltimore Ravens paying \$89,500 in 2013 for the “production of 30,000 co-branded rally towels and 20,000 co-branded hats.” The NFL was the sport that most closely aligned itself with the military with its grotesque war metaphors. And those little video clips between innings from those homesick soldiers cheering the home team from somewhere around the globe, like the ones marine Cecilia Evans recorded to be played during Steelers games at Heinz Field when she was deployed to in Iraq? Staged.

Here's how it worked in the case of MLB and the NFL: Inside the Defense Department was a division called “DVIDS,” which was responsible for the satellite hookups from the remote military bases fans saw during games. DVIDS oversaw a program called “Shout Outs,” in which the military would invite enthusiastic service members to record videos for the military-appreciation days that sports teams would promote during the season. Take, for example, a 2017 email DVIDS sent to service members in an effort to accommodate their staged promotions:

We have received an urgent request for shout outs for the July 23rd Minnesota Twins Military Appreciation Game. If you have any service members who are Twins fans and would be interested in recording and submitting a shout out, please reference “Request #1” in this email. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you for your time and support.

REQUEST #1

Need: Minnesota Twins Baseball Shout Outs

Event: Minnesota Twins Armed Forces Appreciation Day & other games

Requests:

1) Generic Minnesota Twins shout outs may be used for future games if they aren't used for the Military Appreciation Game.

*** Make sure to have fun and show your enthusiasm. Military service members can wear sports gear/fan paraphernalia if they desire.

*** Group shout outs are also acceptable and remember your background is more interesting if it conveys a sense of anything "military."

REQUEST #2

Need: Oakland Raiders Shout Outs and Live Shots

Event: Oakland Raiders Salute to Service Members and Home Games

Requests:

3) The Oakland Raiders would like multiple shout outs from military service members showing their fandom for the Oakland Raiders. Feel free to wear your sports gear and get creative. The important thing is to show enthusiasm and team spirit. Shout outs will be used for their Salute to Service member game on Nov. 26th vs. the Broncos, and also for the remainder of their home games.

*** Don't reference an opponent in your shout out. This allows your shout out to be used for different games.

This wasn't patriotism. This was capitalism. There was nothing organic about having, nor was there any particular demand to have, the military be part of a July 23 Minnesota Twins game.

As for the Raiders, the team was simply fulfilling a contract with the military to make the game look patriotic, to sell patriotism to the public. And of the fan who just wanted to take his twelve-year-old to the game and not think about weapons of mass destruction or the Islamic State? Too bad. Now the kids were being beamed military images so when they got out of high school, maybe they'd sign up too.

That the army was surreptitiously recruiting was hidden from the public, but Lieutenant General Honoré had no problem with this. "Oh no, we gotta recruit them little SOBs. Mom and Dad, we're gonna recrui

'em. You better hold on to them if you don't want them in the Army," he said. "We're gonna recruit the hell out of them. That's how we man the force. We only get two out of every ten that qualify. And [sports] is a good place to recruit them. . . . About 65 percent of our soldiers come from rural communities, and any exposure we can get to that population is very important, and important that people see the esteem that people hold those in uniform who serve. It may start a conversation with a kid that may show some interest when the recruiters come around the high school to get them to come to one of the service academies or enlist them to come into the military. This is a source of how we play the game."

The military had made it a deliberate strategy to target kids watching their favorite team as potential soldiers. The leagues should have been transparent about this.

"The kids that go to [sporting events] have a pretty good tendency to play sports, and to be a warrior you need to be what we call the 'warrior athlete,' Honoré said. "You gotta be able to run. You gotta be able to jump. You can't be no fat ass. We need the warrior athlete. And the people who say they want to go to a game and don't want to see the color guard on the field, I feel sorry for them, but we've got to recruit every opportunity we get to get the right young people who want to serve and participate."

When McCain and Flake's report was released, the Department of Defense didn't even try to hide from it. They were just looking to recruit soldiers, and the ballpark, NASCAR, post-9/11 with all its ceremony, seemed to be a great place to find tomorrow's infantrymen and officers. The leagues, meanwhile, didn't acknowledge it was subjecting its fans to surreptitious recruitment, and the scam continued unchecked.

It was also bad enough that within this climate, leagues were profiting from the images and memorabilia from third-party relationships with shady affiliates like GovX designed to build a mailing list to sell military-grade equipment to veterans in exchange for discounted tickets to veterans and first responders. Each new revelation eroded the enjoyment of watching a game that was supposed to be a diversion from the real world. Everybody, it seemed, was cashing in.

When all the dots were connected, the finished picture was an ugly one. The ballpark was the place where the Pentagon sold its endless war to the public, and while sending out emails to servicemen to stage "watch parties," neither the military nor sports teams had the stones to admit

it publicly. When McCain and Flake exposed the relationship, the UK *Guardian* newspaper reported that the Defense Department was concerned that declining unemployment and better access to college were depressing enlistments, and that it believed recruiting through sports might be fertile territory.

A Defense Department memo from the same time referred to pro sports games as a "neutral environment" where recruiters could talk with potential soldiers, including the 32 percent of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds who watch the NFL.

NOBODY CARES, OR DO NOT OBEY IN ADVANCE

The *Paid Patriotism* report was damning, insulting, indicting. It was about phony patriotism, phony concern for veterans, a con. So, naturally, having been taken for a ride by the military-industrial complex and by sports owners who couldn't keep their watery beer under ten bucks but were willing to sell you the special Memorial Day alternate jersey to keep the war machine going, the angry American public revolted, hoisted Flake and McCain on its collective shoulders, and thanked them for being the public watchdogs keeping the power in check, right? Wrong.

Nobody cared.

America was so immersed in the reality show that it didn't mind that the reality wasn't real. Nor did McCain and Flake's revelations force the public to even rethink its part of the whole hero business. That was the power of 9/11. It still lingered, and the promotions continued. Nobody wanted the truth about the cost of war on the warriors or a third-party company like GovX selling bowie knives to returning soldiers who might be suffering from PTSD in exchange for a couple of Celtics tickets.

What the fans were really expressing by embracing a fraud, Lieutenant General Honoré thought, was the guilt they carried around for not having served. At the game, with sixty thousand other people who felt similarly, fans could feel better about their place in a world with no draft and wealth inequality so great (and increasing daily) that only the Americans with virtually no other options or alternative way to afford college did the fighting. Collective guilt from not doing one's share became a large part of the culture, and because of that, the fans were complicit in this deception of patriotism for money. Honoré felt the guilt was misguided.

“That was the objective of a volunteer army. It was a political objective, and that’s what we’ve got. It’s not something to feel ashamed about,” he said. “There’s more than one way to serve. Telling stories is one way, respecting your country, holding your government accountable to what’s in the Constitution. And we all have a responsibility to do that, to vote, to pay our taxes, and to volunteer and help those who need help in our communities, and there are a lot of veterans who need help.”

The jig was up, and veterans would write about feeling used. “Those planes fly overhead and cannons salute to glorify the casualties of our children, friends, sisters, fathers, mothers,” wrote one former marine. “And all of it paid for by the United States Government.”

No matter. The public didn’t even listen to the guys doing the fighting. The selling of patriotism, of healing the wound of 9/11, of participating in something that *felt* unifying, even if it was inauthentic and bred an encroaching authoritarianism, were more important than the effects of war.

“I guess I’d feel deceived if I thought about it in those terms, but I don’t think about it that way,” said WFAN New York Yankees reporter Sweeny Murti. “It’s pretty obvious almost everyone is on the same side of the patriotic argument, so you’re not creating any controversy, and you’re not looking to create controversy. Maybe you’re trying to create the Christmassy atmosphere and make a show of it. Sure, it’s furthering a political agenda that doesn’t have a controversy attached to it, and if it did, you wouldn’t be doing it. If you knew you were alienating half your audience by doing that, you wouldn’t even think of doing it.

“When I watch the homecomings, I bawl like a baby,” Murti continued. “No matter what part of it happens to be staged, the actual child and the dad getting reunited isn’t staged. That part is authentic. I buy into it, and if it is staged, I’m guilty. They’ve got me in a movie, and I’m guilty. They got what they paid for.”

Murti’s position was a common one, emblematic of where America found itself in the dozen and a half years after 9/11. *It’s furthering a political agenda that doesn’t have a controversy attached to it and creating a Christmassy atmosphere* sure were a hell of a way to describe seventeen years of war, but that’s how disconnected war all felt—and that was precisely the emotion this concoction was intended to produce. Though you’d have to be a monster to not feel sympathy and support for soldiers, an important part

of patriotism—for the sake of the soldiers—was the public holding the government accountable that it was fighting for the right reasons.

The more soldiers became a part of everyday life—at the airport, the train station, Times Square, the Pantheon, or any world landmark that was a target for attack—the less you heard the word *war*. It was a word scrubbed from whatever limited national conversation was taking place. Post-9/11 America killed the neutral sporting event, but it also killed the traditional antiwar movement. America didn't even feel as if it was at war, and when soldiers were trotted out to the pitcher's mound—the wounded, the maimed, the broken by PTSD—the public never reconnected them to the trauma and to the *politics* that had maimed and broken them in the first place. That part disappeared. "If we want to be a nation that supports our all-volunteer military, then we have to start bridging the gap between the less than 1 percent that serves and the rest of the population," Sean Doolittle said. "These displays can serve to widen that divide by inadvertently illustrating [that] only a very small percentage of Americans will volunteer to serve in our military."

Bill Astore had it right: after 9/11, the president told the public to go shopping, have fun, support the troops at the ballgame, let the experts handle it, and all the public had to do was stand when told, cheer when told, and not think.

"Am I a 'dissenter'? It's a weird label to wear," Astore said. "I like to think I'm being patriotic when I call attention to the corporate military's blatant propaganda and manipulation of the masses. I see them—with all their 'warrior' and 'warfighter' talk—as dissenters from the proud tradition of a citizen-soldier military.

"What I mean is this: if we label ourselves as 'dissenters,' we are automatically dismissed by many as un-American. Terminology is critical, and I don't have an easy answer. Again, who is the patriot? Isn't dissent patriotic?"

WOKE-A-COLA

At times, it appeared the deception that the military and pro leagues put over on the public gave automatic vindication to a revived Heritage. Both institutions were exposed, revealing an adventure in cynicism for money and support of an ongoing war, while the Heritage built on the traditions

of boundless, sturdy courage in the model of Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, Curt Flood, and Muhammad Ali.

Or did it? Colin Kaepernick's worldview as a man changed after Ferguson, and there were several clear moments of authenticity. But *activism* in post-Ferguson America became as trendy as *patriotism*—and potentially as lucrative, both in cash and street cred—and it was important to remember that the Heritage was built on sacrifice, not speeches. Marketers wanted in on the wave, and by capitalizing on the optics of young people taking to the streets, activism was no different. Madison Avenue saw a way, no matter how clumsy and tone-deaf, to connect to that coveted demographic of young people who moved the advertising needle. Take, for example, Ieshia Evans, the young black woman who, during a June 2016 protest rally in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, stood peacefully in the middle of the street in front of rows of state police clad in full riot gear. Reuters photographer Jonathan Bachman captured the moment of two officers in body armor descending on a lone black woman wearing a summer dress.

Less than a year later, Pepsi attempted, disastrously, to capitalize on the cool of protest by recreating Bachman's iconic image, substituting Evans with the white model Kendall Jenner, protesters behind her, law enforcement in front, brokering the peace by handing the cops a Pepsi. In the ad, the cops are dressed not in menacing, ready-to-kick-some-ass body armor, as they had been in confrontations with citizens in Ferguson, Baltimore, and a host of other places, but in standard-dress police uniforms, humanizing baseball caps, and smiles. A corporation distorted the images of a menacing militarized police presence in the streets, just to sell a can of soda.

The ad drew so much scorn that the company fell into full retreat, apologizing and quickly pulling the ad. It was one of the great boneheaded plays of the year, straight out of the *what were you thinking?* playbook. Of course, everyone knew exactly what Pepsi was thinking. The company was thinking of profiting off the cool, off the optics of protest. And to the suits who weren't the target of the police, *cool* meant standing up to the cops. It was all a game now, a show of images and sensations the suits could exploit. Money could be made from it, and no one wanted to miss a branding opportunity.

And that was the danger. Now all the Big Boys were getting involved, showing support, in hot recognition of the money that could be made off

the zeitgeist. Maybe their interest was out of conviction, out of making the world a better place . . . maybe . . . but *definitely* Coke and Pepsi were in it for the money.

In February 2017, Nike released an ad supporting the revival of superstars taking an active role in the Heritage in a spot called "Equality," which featured all the "right" hallmarks. It had the activist stars representing the diverse constituencies (the openly gay Megan Rapinoe) and the superstars (LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Serena Williams). It had the authoritative narrative for the Better Tomorrow (voiced over by the actor Michael B. Jordan) and, to give it that mourning, soulful depth, the gospel piano and voice of Alicia Keys covering Sam Cooke's elegiac "A Change Is Gonna Come." The ad was shot in slow motion, in black and white, each set piece attempting to give the inner city a dignity in a commercial that it did not often receive in real life (like the shot of kids playing basketball and a police cruiser, lights on, rides slowly and menacing into the foreground, or the black and brown women and men sitting on the courthouse steps under the chiseled words "And Equal Justice Under Law"). The ad rises to a crescendo with James, his face in close-up, with the last words of the change that is possible. As the best player in America, he gets the final image and the last word of the ad, representing a philosophical break with OJ, Michael, and Tiger, the best players of other eras who had no interest in the front lines. James is the leader, the face of the twenty-first-century chapter of the Heritage.

Of course, Nike received praise for "Equality" because it was glossy, inspiring, well-produced, and packed with the kind of star power that stirred people and made them believe the Heritage was back, invoking daily comparisons of the athlete *du jour* to Muhammad Ali. It hit all the right notes to suggest irreverence, independence, and an idealism that progressives wanted to believe, but the more hardened dissidents knew not to bet on corporate courage. In a time when sports wouldn't say a bad word about cops regardless of how many "officer involved shootings" took place, Nike didn't shy from depicting a menacing presence of the police. That gave them street cred. And street cred made them more marketable.

Yet, as with paid patriotism, whether any of it could really be trusted was another story. Nike, like Pepsi but to a lesser extent, was taking advantage of an opportunity. The NBA All-Star Game had just been moved from Charlotte to New Orleans in protest of HB-2, the state's notorious

“bathroom bill,” which sought to deny transgender people from using the public bathroom of their choice. If protest was now marketable, then it ceased to be protest. If activism was cool, full of celebrity and corporate backing, it lost much of its purpose, its dissidence, and you could count the minutes before the hipster protesters moved on to the next hot thing. If the corporations were getting involved co-opting, mainstreaming dissent, it wasn't really dissent. It was just another way to win optics and dilute a cause that wasn't a game.

Besides, Nike wanted it both ways. Just two years earlier—less than a month after Freddie Gray's death and at a time when police had killed 420 people, and it wasn't even yet June 1—Nike announced its Law Enforcement Appreciation Day promotion, offering a 30 percent discount off all apparel to police and other law enforcement officers. Maybe “Equality” was just Nike performance art.

So how authentic was the awakening? Was it just companies competing to market being *woke*, a flimsy attempt to use Ferguson anger over life-and-death issues as a way to steal a little market share with ballplayers joining in to burnish the image without risk, while the underlying structures that have been predicted since the Kerner Commission remain in place? It was true that the players, too, were not yesterday's Heritage. They were of a different social class but by race and lineage to the struggle were expected to be present. Even Colin Kaepernick, for all he endured and risked, did so with millions already earned. He was not John Carlos, who had to take odd jobs below minimum wage just to pay his rent. The children of the modern player did not attend public school, and the athletes were super-rich. When he played for the Yankees in the mid-2000s, Gary Sheffield would talk about the difficulties of keeping his kids off the streets in Tampa when they were home from attending the nation's most elite prep schools, where they were classmates with Saudi princes and princesses. Sheffield earned nearly \$150 million in salary alone over his career. Could these public shows of support be called activism when no one really seemed to be risking anything?

To join the Heritage, you had to pay the cost. Jackie, Muhammad, Smith, Carlos, and Flood all risked, and all lost something. With the exception of Colin Kaepernick, many current players made political negotiations with the leagues, wore T-shirts, and asked permission to protest

without direct skin in the game. Yet, being black linked them, in some ways, to the same fights of old, because despite their celebrity, the players were fighting for the same group of people, still on the bottom, still at the mercy of the service revolver.

"I think we're born into the Heritage, but I think what we're talking about is reclamation. Do we reclaim it by wearing a T-shirt? No, you're nodding to it," said De Lacy Davis, who founded Black Cops Against Police Brutality and believes the constant sparring with and scrutiny of fellow officers ultimately cost him his career in law enforcement.

"The real reclamation is when you decide to get on the bus. Where do you get on the bus? Where will you participate? The question will be, 'What did you do for the people? What did you do with your wealth? Can I impact the life of a young person when it counts, not when it's safe?'"

THE POLITICS OF POISON

Donald Trump did not create the fractures that have ripped sports away from its unifying moorings, but he exacerbated each strain by his nationalism, divisiveness, and appeal to authoritarianism. While the black players knelt, Trump's first year included his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, vowing to undo, roll back, or ignore the recommendations and data the Obama White House had compiled regarding constitutional violations by police departments across the country.

Trump began his presidency by attacking dissent, arresting 200 protesters of his inauguration and charging 194 with felonies that could lead to serious jail time. He spent the year pitting protesting black players against their country and shaped sixteen years of post-9/11 pageantry into an ally of whiteness against black citizens who challenged him, calling them disrespectful to the military, even though the country employed a multicultural, voluntary fighting force that was heavily minority. That fact was secondary to the television optic of black players kneeling while white fans stood with their hands on their hearts. White fans owned the flag and, by extension, were real Americans. During a high school basketball game in Connecticut, white fans taunted a team of predominantly black and Latino players with the chant "Trump! Trump! Trump!" when the team shot free throws.

In the theater of easy visuals, the black players knelt in protest were un-American, and Trump provoked this by using soldiers as the object of the players' perceived disrespect. Like *patriotism*, the military also took on the characteristics of the white, mainstream ideal—even though the concerns of the players were universal across all races. Trump portrayed the military to his supporters as if it needed his defense against black dissidence, even though players had never protested the armed forces.

The entire 9/11 ceremony, in truth, contained those very characteristics from the day the Towers fell—the hero narrative in New York always contained elements of the old ethnic battle lines because of the historical grip the city's Irish and Italians have held on police and fire—and Trump weaponized those old characteristics further. Within the framework of sports, thanks in part to Trump but mostly to the unwillingness of white athletes to engage in social movements that aren't sanctioned by the team or league—and to a corporate media that aided heavily in the misdirection—*patriotism* has been turned into a white ideal. Protesters, African American athletes especially, constantly find themselves on the defensive. The consequence of the post-9/11 coupling of police and military now meant challenging the police for killing LaQuan McDonald or Akai Gurley, which now meant challenging the flag's authority—so now players challenging cops were unpatriotic. The effects—of paid patriotism, embedding police in the games, and attacking black players from the White House—were cumulative, and the president of the United States intended to pressure protest right out of the game.

The appropriate pressure valve was represented by the owners, several of whom, including Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and New England's Robert Kraft, gave more than \$1 million each to Trump's presidential campaign. During one particularly contentious meeting between players and owners held in Washington, DC, players' union head DeMaurice Smith, aided by a few players, called out a few of the owners for supporting Trump financially while at the same time pledging money to combat issues in black communities.

"You've been fine with the players being out front on this issue," Smith said. "And you were happy with our players taking a beating from the right and being characterized as anti-cop, anti-America, anti-military, and that's bullshit, and the reason why you did it is because I think you let your politics get in the way of our business."

THE MARCH ON 245

Paid Patriotism represented a military-corporate collusion that has applied enormous pressure on citizens who disagree with their government. The sheer volume of nationalistic themes would give any thinking person pause before challenging authority. There was a time when Americans broke out the American flag between Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Today the American flag is a year-round accessory.

Over the history of sports, the disagreeing constituency has overwhelmingly been black players. Before shifting to advocacy for African Americans, the Heritage was built originally on black players speaking out on issues to reflect their patriotism and fidelity to the country. Today, as the nation continues down its path of demonizing dissent as un-American, the stamina of the athlete to be vocal about causes will be even more greatly tested.

Before Ferguson, Adam Jones of the Baltimore Orioles once took a selfie with the cops for the cover of *ESPN the Magazine*. Two years later, when asked about the NFL protests, Jones said that baseball would never engage in such a fashion because it was essentially "a white man's sport." The game that created the Heritage had a population of African American players perennially under 10 percent, and the black impact in baseball was diminishing rapidly. Managerial and front-office hiring had always been slow, but black stars had been the face of the game since Jackie.

Once, in 2009, Jimmie Lee Solomon, then baseball's highest-ranking African American in the Commissioner's Office, called a clandestine summit of players to discuss what felt like the erasing of black participation from the game—from hiring to marketing to advertising to outreach. The meeting was initiated by Solomon but also by players, from veteran second baseman Orlando Hudson to centerfielder Torii Hunter to the first baseman Cliff Floyd. The issues of declining black participation had become an annual cliché. Solomon's plan was to keep the group small. He also wanted the group to be contemporary, with younger veteran players, like Hunter, who would feel more empowered to take a leadership role without the elders from previous generations. The meeting would occur on a neutral site so it could be informal and unofficial. He also had the players pay their own way to the meeting as a sign of their personal commitment. Though Solomon never played in the big leagues, his reaching out to the players was reminiscent of the old traditions in baseball, where blacks in the game kept a tight, informed group.

Solomon's plan backfired badly. Little details of the potential meeting leaked out, and both the Players Association executive director, Donald Fehr, and MLB commissioner Bud Selig, were furious at Solomon for, as they saw it, going rogue. Solomon contacting players on his own represented a serious breach in a relationship as adversarial as the one between the league and the union. Tony Clark, who had just retired as an active major league player and would one day become the union's executive director, wasn't on Solomon's original list at the time—which represented another breach in protocol, as the union was grooming Clark for a major role.

Suddenly, Solomon's secret, off-the-record meeting with a few key black players turned into an official summit at the MLB headquarters on 245 Park Avenue. All the heavy hitters were there: Fehr, Selig, and legendary players such as Hall of Famers Eddie Murray and Frank Robinson.

"We called it the March on 245," MLB Players Association executive director Tony Clark remembered. "The players were all staying at the same hotel, and the sight of these black men in well-tailored suits walking down Park Avenue. It was a fascinating visual."

For the players, the meeting was a disaster; for instead of an authentic discussion of issues, the hierarchy spoke. One person at the meeting recalled Selig talking about his long relationship with black people, how many friends he had, and how many black people were also concerned about African Americans in the game—to applause from the room. No one spoke spontaneously.

"I definitely got slapped on the wrist for this," Solomon recalled. By trying to reach across the aisle, tapping indirectly into the traditions of the Heritage, Solomon had violated the protocols of communication between the Commissioner's Office and the Players Association, and a tight, open session at an off-site location where players could be candid turned into an officially sanctioned dog-and-pony show at MLB headquarters, where no one spoke out of turn, the bosses said all the right things, committees were formed, and nothing got done. Jimmie Lee Solomon learned the oldest rule book the hard way: no good deed goes unpunished.

In the years since, the spirit of the Heritage in baseball is weakening as rapidly as the player percentage decline. There is a cultural effect at work. Perhaps it is because of the money, but as the elders age out of the game without being replaced by a new generation, the players are not communicating and connecting as black men with a special heritage in the sport.

The pressure is constant, to not discuss racial issues, to be greenwashed by their millions, and, in today's climate, to not get involved the political discussions occurring in basketball and football.

On September 29, 2017, a week after Donald Trump referred to kneeling NFL players as "sons of bitches," the Oakland A's biracial rookie catcher Bruce Maxwell took a knee during the national anthem. He was the only baseball player to do so, and to his disappointment, none of the elder black players—not Adam Jones or C. C. Sabathia or Justin Upton—joined him. Before the Washington Nationals began their playoff series against the Chicago Cubs, Dusty Baker called Maxwell, and the two talked for two hours. One former player, Coco Crisp, also called. Adam Jones did send a quick text, but the rest of the game, the established black players said nothing. Meanwhile, as baseball players distanced themselves from him, one of the first people to call Maxwell directly was Colin Kaepernick.

"They don't feel connected to it," Dusty Baker said. "You can see it, and there aren't enough of us in the game anymore, so you know you're going to deal with the backlash and not have any support. It's a different generation, but if you let your traditions go, you'll never get them back."

EPILOGUE

THE PEACEMAKERS

You want my politics out of sports? Take *your* politics out of sports.

—COLIN KAEPERNICK

THE REVIVAL OF THE HERITAGE has been made possible through the old cliché that, for the first time in decades, now works in favor of social justice: the player with the biggest number of zeroes on his paycheck shapes the culture. Today, that player is LeBron James.

James does not hide from his liberal politics. He loudly rejects Donald Trump and his policies. James pledged over \$40 million to send children from his hometown of Akron to college, and unlike in the Michael Jordan era, he did not out of fear of offending the white mainstream write a check without showing his face. James has done what Jordan did not: he gave cover to the athletes without his talent or bank account to be more vocal politically. He sent the message that being politically active should not be radical but commonplace.

"I'm watching TV at five o'clock in the morning in the gym, and they're saying that LeBron got more points than Michael Jordan, but there'll never be another Michael Jordan," Al Sharpton recalled during the 2017 NBA playoffs. "But LeBron far excels over him in terms of standing up for causes by putting on that hoodie for Trayvon and that I Can't Breathe T-shirt for Eric Garner. I can't think of anything remotely close that Michael did."

Two months before Colin Kaepernick's awakening, James, Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwyane Wade took the stage in Los Angeles at

the 2016 ESPYs, ESPN's annual glamourfest award show. Days before, James's representatives contacted ESPN president John Skipper on behalf of the foursome with a request: they wanted to use the ESPYs to make a statement to America after a week of violence between black communities and police so gruesome that it prompted even Michael Jordan, now part of the ruling class as owner of the Charlotte Hornets, to speak.

In St. Anthony, a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, thirty-two-year-old public school cafeteria worker Philando Castile was shot seven times and killed by police after being stopped for a broken tail light. In Baton Rouge, another black man, thirty-seven-year-old Alton Sterling was killed by police after they confronted him for selling compact discs on a sidewalk. Days after that, Xavier Micah Johnson, an Army veteran who had served in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2014, ambushed and killed five police officers in Dallas in alleged retaliation. In retaliation for the killing of Sterling, twenty-nine-year-old marine veteran Gavin Long ambushed police officers in Baton Rouge, killing three and wounding three more.

"The four of us are talking to our fellow athletes with the country watching, because we cannot ignore the realities of the current state of America," Anthony began. "The system is broken. The problems are not new, the violence is not new, and the racial divide is definitely not new, but the urgency for change is at an all-time high."

Paul, too, reclaimed his inheritance. "Decades ago, legends like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jim Brown, Billie Jean King, Arthur Ashe, and countless others, they set a model for what athletes should stand for. So we choose to follow in their footsteps," he said.

James went last: "It's not about being a role model. It's not about our responsibility to the tradition of activism. I know tonight, we're honoring Muhammad Ali, the GOAT [Greatest of All Time], but to do his legacy any justice, let's use this moment as a call to action for all professional athletes."

The old ways were uncomplicated. Paul Robeson and Muhammad Ali were unambiguous: they fought for black people. Modern athletes, however, have not aligned themselves with the Heritage, but these players are now practically walking portfolios. As of 2017, Dwyane Wade had earned \$179.5 million in salary alone; Carmelo Anthony, \$206 million. Serena Williams's net worth, according to *Forbes*, was \$150 million in 2016, and

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she owned a minority stake in the Miami Dolphins. Venus Williams owns her own clothing line. James, meanwhile, executive produces game shows, movies, TV programs. The *Motley Fool* investment guide estimated his net worth in 2017 to be roughly \$400 million. Alex Rodriguez was never an activist, but he was so rich that he referred to Warren Buffett as “a friend,” for goodness’ sake.

Today’s players are ubiquitous, shaped by the marketing muscle of some of the world’s biggest corporations. They are the public possessions of an ostensibly postracial, commodified world. They are also financially conflicted, because maintaining the traditions of the Heritage means challenging the corporate mainstream—but today they *are* the corporate mainstream. They are the power they’re expected to protest.

Their ubiquity within the culture has given black athletes a different mission: they are not expected to stand for black people but to make the world a better place. During negotiations with the players, ESPN edited their comments that sounded “anti-police,” while the players worked with their individual teams and business relationships to ensure they were not harming their financial partners. The editing of the statements continued right up until the minutes before the curtain rose, John Skipper recalled. The message was powerful, but it was the result of compromise, concession. If the original purpose of the Heritage was for athletes, in Tommie Smith’s words, to “support oppressed people around the world,” the modern political black athlete more resembles a privileged, corporate bridge between the races whose job isn’t to advocate for Pan-Africanism, for the black people of the world, as Ali and Robeson did, but to advocate for everybody. It is to be a peacemaker.

That means being caught in the middle during a time where there is no middle. Despite the high-profile killings by Gavin Long and Micah Xavier Johnson, widespread systemic black retaliation against police does not exist, yet Wade addressed the issue as if foreshadowing a race war. “The racial profiling has to stop. The shoot-to-kill mentality has to stop. Not seeing the value of black and brown bodies has to stop,” he said. Then, he added a negotiated, balancing qualifier, necessary to accommodate a pro-police corporate obligation. “But also the retaliation has to stop. The endless gun violence in places like Chicago, Dallas—not to mention Orlando—it has to stop. Enough. Enough is enough.” Wade’s words underscored the corporate minefield today’s players tread.

Days later, Jordan appeared, comfortable speaking out because the retaliatory killings allowed him to appease that middle, simultaneously admonishing and supporting the black community—which played well with cops and an American mainstream that could not see beyond black people kneeling. In a piece for the ESPN website “The Undefeated” titled “I Can No Longer Stay Silent,” Jordan reinforced his cautious, inoffensive public style, playing to both sides—and writing a really big check:

I can no longer stay silent. We need to find solutions that ensure people of color receive fair and equal treatment AND that police officers—who put their lives on the line every day to protect us all—are respected and supported. . . . To support that effort, I am making contributions of \$1 million each to two organizations, the International Association of Chiefs of Police’s newly established Institute for Community-Police Relations and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

Chris Paul negotiated, prefacing his comments in the same qualifying fashion, either that not all cops are bad or by announcing his personal bona fides. Paul’s uncle was a police officer, as if that special qualification were required for him to voice an opinion. In post-9/11 America, perhaps it was.

The white mainstream put critics of police and military on the defensive. A common, disjointed response to police killings was to decry so-called “black on black” crime, where the high numbers of killings in the inner cities such as Chicago were an epidemic—thus Wade’s inclusion of the “senseless gun violence in Chicago” was personal as it is his hometown, but was also seen as a negotiated appeasement to the “What about black on black crime?” sect. It was always a false equivalence in a time of the declining value of facts. Crime ostensibly is committed by criminals, yet by this reasoning, police were compared with lawbreakers. It was actually a rhetorical derivative of *Shut up and play*: black people killed one another, so why should anyone complain when the good guys kill them too?

James said the night should have been a call to action for all athletes, but just as in the 1960s, few if any white players accepted the challenge. The police unions reacted to player protests first by co-opting the name of the movement Black Lives Matter into their own counter-protest, Blue Lives Matter, and then by often ridiculing black victims and threatening to withhold services to events where they received criticism from black

celebrities. When James said, "It's not about our responsibility to the traditions of activism," he could not have been more mistaken. It was *precisely* that, because he stood in front of America for the same reason his forebearers had whenever they sought white support: pleading to be seen as full Americans with a public that only saw flag over grievance, authority over justice. It was about reclaiming a voice from an American public that didn't think they had ever earned the right to speak at all.

It was all complicated. James was a revelation, but when Tamir Rice was killed, he did not return to Cleveland and walk arm in arm with the people as Anthony did in Baltimore. Instead, he was curiously distant. Like the rest of the modern incarnation of the Heritage, James was expected to be a peacemaker, urging calm, facilitating "dialogue." It was being a bridge, ironically, to nowhere.

PAYING THE PRICE, 2017

It is for this reason that Colin Kaepernick engenders so much anger: he is not a peacemaker. He did not seek the approval of the white public for his beliefs. He did not try to make them comfortable. There were no ride-alongs with cops or PR experts massaging the words until they found *just the right tone* that didn't offend the mainstream or the cops. For his fidelity, the NFL punished Colin Kaepernick just as the US government had punished Robeson and Ali, by eliminating his ability to work, in this case closing off the American pro football world to him. The blueprint of dealing with the Heritage had not changed. Activist players before him had all paid the price, and now it was his turn.

Invariably, it was the black players who provided the league cover. Michael Vick said Kaepernick's job search could be aided by cutting his hair. Ray Lewis said Kaepernick needed to "shut his mouth." If Donald Trump provided the truth serum that embodied the backlash against eight years of a black president, Colin Kaepernick provided the truth serum for an unevolved sports industry. He exposed the limits of the Heritage and, perhaps most importantly, 125 years after Reconstruction, revealed America's unchanged valuing of the black body over the black brain.

The black body is so important that the NFL allowed Vick a pathway back after he did a year and a half in Leavenworth. When Vick, murderer of animals, was released from prison, the NFL awaited. He played for

Philadelphia, which steadfastly withstood the protests against Vick, then with the New York Jets and Pittsburgh Steelers before retiring. He was then hired by the Kansas City Chiefs organization. Michael Irvin, who as a player was busted for cocaine and settled out of court for sexual assault, is one of the most prominent faces on the league's television house organ, the NFL Network. Irvin was nearly sent to prison for twenty years after an altercation with a teammate could have resulted in a possible parole violation before the Dallas Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones, intervened to broker a truce.

Jones is the same man who threatens his players against kneeling and worked behind the scenes to adopt rules forcing players to stand for the national anthem. The year before, Jones signed defensive end Greg Hardy, who was found guilty of beating and threatening to kill his girlfriend.

The black body is so important to NFL owners that it allows the league to celebrate Lewis, implicated in 2000 as a witness to an unsolved double murder. Lewis pleaded out of a two-count murder charge in exchange for his testimony and a guilty plea to obstruction of justice. To this day, the murders remain unsolved, and Lewis was not only welcomed back to the NFL but never had to leave. The NFL fined him \$250,000 but placed him in such high esteem that his team, the Baltimore Ravens, gave him a front-office position after he retired and even erected a statue in his honor. ESPN, a league television partner, made him a lead on the prestigious *Monday Night Football* broadcast team.

How could Vick and Lewis even be employed after what they'd done, let alone feel emboldened to offer Kaepernick advice on how to behave? Or how could an anonymous NFL executive say in 2016 Kaepernick was as hated a player as Rae Carruth, the former Carolina wide receiver sentenced to life in prison for ordering the murder of his pregnant girlfriend—and have virtually no players come to his defense? How could the football public accept such a vulgar incongruity? In a sense, it was easy: Vick and Lewis fit the stereotype of what a black man is supposed to be: violent, aggressive, criminal. It was easy for Steve Bisciotti, the owner of the Ravens, to navigate Lewis. Black male anger sold. It was what the public expected from them, and it allowed white male owners to seem benevolent without having their power threatened. The players were troubled, and paternalistic owners would provide post-playing careers for three convicted felons.

There was another reason that Vick and Lewis were welcomed by the NFL: Vick and Lewis knew what football meant to them. Football was their lives. They were not going to challenge the sport that had graciously given them a second chance after prison for Vick and an ugly trial for Lewis. They would never challenge the NFL in any capacity again. They could be counted on to be controlled.

Kaepernick was different. He traveled three weeks in Africa, to Morocco, Ghana, and Egypt. He helped raise \$3 million that went to Somalia famine relief. Being on African soil, he said, was like “walking around not knowing there was a refrigerator on your back and waking up and realizing it’s been lifted.” He was surrounded by Africans who had nothing, no million-dollar contracts, no Beats headphones, and no private jets. “And you know what?” Kaepernick said. “They were connected in ways we aren’t. They ate better and healthier than people in our inner cities. How can that be? We have all these things. How can they add up to nothing for so many people?” He was guided by the black brain, the black child with white parents who knew intimate truths about the American situation so much better than the people who booed him and once paid him. He was the black mind working. He was the threat.

The fans were not insulated from the indictment. They, too, indicated their appreciation of the black body over the black mind by forgiving Hardy, Vick, and players like Joe Mixon, the University of Oklahoma running back who punched a woman in a bar and broke an orbital bone in her face, but being ruthless toward Kaepernick for the crime of thinking. Not Vick, Lewis, Hardy, nor any in a roll call of others, none of their transgressions, moral or legal—nor the destructive nature of the game that was destroying the brains and bodies of their heroes—were sufficient reasons for fans to boycott the league. The Kaepernick threat was not disgracing the integrity of the league but challenging it to allow the black mind to think for himself.

“We’ve lionized Muhammad Ali from the days when he scared us,” said the documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. “I wish we could see a little Muhammad Ali in Colin Kaepernick—and give him a fucking job.”

In exile, *GQ* magazine named Kaepernick its citizen of the year. The ACLU honored him with its Eason Monroe Courageous Advocate Award. On December 5, 2017, the *Nation* awarded him its Puffin Prize for Creative Citizenship. That same evening, he accepted the Sports Illustrated

Muhammad Ali Legacy Award, presented to him by the music superstar Beyoncé.

“I accept this award not for myself but on behalf of the people. Because if it were not for my love of the people, I would not have protested,” Kaepernick said that night. “And if it was not for the support from the people, I would not be on this stage today. With or without the NFL’s platform, I will continue to work for the people, because my platform is the people.”

Two days later, a jury in Mesa, Arizona, acquitted officer Philip Brailsford of the January 18, 2016, killing of Daniel Shaver, a twenty-six-year-old father of two who worked as a pest-control specialist. Shaver was showing off the air gun he used for killing birds to some acquaintances in his hotel room. The police were called after guests saw the gun pointed out the window. Bodycam footage showed Shaver in the hallway of the La Quinta Inn on his knees pleading for his life while the officers tell him on several occasions they will kill him if he makes any sudden moves. For nearly five minutes, the officers alternately scream confusing commands at Shaver, reminding him he will “not survive” the encounter if he doesn’t cooperate. At the four-minute mark of the video, with Shaver on his knees sobbing for his life, Brailsford fires five shots from his AR-15 assault rifle at point blank range, killing him instantly.

Sixteen months earlier, Colin Kaepernick began his protest angry that “there are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave,” and now an unarmed white man had been shot dead by another police officer acquitted of all charges by a jury that believed Brailsford’s claim that he feared for his life. Charles Langley, the commanding officer at the scene, who had already had a checkered record as an officer, left the force three months after the shooting and was never charged. Brailsford escaped a twenty-five-year prison term, Shaver was dead, and Langley retired with a full pension—to the Philippines.

A RETURN TO UNOCCUPIED TERRITORY?

For as much as *Shut up and play* is a prevalent rallying cry, and a private wish of the corporations nervous about race, protest, and their bottom lines, it is not one practiced by the very entities—networks, leagues, advertisers, and fans—who claim to want the simplicity of touchdowns and

base hits. On November 6, 2017, the ESPN show *First Take*, one of its signature programs, broadcast from the deck of a navy ship in honor of Veterans Day. Six weeks earlier, as Donald Trump portrayed his own citizens as unpatriotic, PBS aired Burns's eighteen-hour documentary *The Vietnam War*. The film's footage of the antiwar movement contrasted markedly with today's deference to the military.

"It's a question of having skin in the game," Burns said. "When you have a draft, no matter how unfair it was with its loopholes in the 1960s that benefited the well-to-do to avoid it, the poor with fewer options were going to serve a disproportionate amount. But a lottery system is a huge boon to the antiwar movement because everybody and their mothers, especially their mothers, has skin in the game.

"Today, we have a separate military class that suffers the wounds of war for the rest of us with no pushback. It permits the worst kind of 'patriotism,' where you get to grandstand and politicize and say 'Thank you for your service,' which is no longer a real thing, but just a way to end a sentence."

Perhaps the supreme irony of this part of the post-9/11 story is how the Twin Towers were destroyed and the ostensibly neutral field of sports was where the police and the military unified a country only to have those same ballparks, police, and military so heavily politicized and commercialized after almost twenty years of propaganda that it is their presence in the culture that now tears elements of it apart.

That is what happens, though, when a moment that once was organic is twisted into a cynical concoction, propagandized by corporations, the sports industry, and the Pentagon, a hero narrative built on inauthenticity. Since Emancipation, police have been a polarizing presence in black America, and depending on one's class, race, and circumstances in America in general, police are a friend to some, an occupier to others—and one of the most egregious uses of force has been when sports has demanded allegiance to police not just from paying customers but from the black players whose experiences with police have often been far from heroic. Police and fire departments, and unions, built the unskilled immigrant middle class—the Irish and the Italians, especially—and spent much of the twentieth century battling the black community at large and keeping African Americans out. As an institution, the police have never truly belonged to African Americans. The same is true, in a sense, of the military,

whose fighting force has always been skewed toward the poor and the working class. It saw its ranks of minorities rise both out of opportunity and the desire to prove itself and be accepted as full-bodied Americans, only to have black veterans after World War I be unrecognized as soldiers, and after World War II be shut out of the middle-class opportunities of the GI Bill. The challenge becomes cultural—to encourage diversity of color and diversity of thought—otherwise the expectation will be as it is today: to have people of color join organizations that want them but also want to amputate their cultural inclusion and assimilate, a tension that exists in barracks and newsrooms and locker rooms across America.

“In the process of this public relations, we’ve actually forgotten the values the country was founded on. And we distort a person like Colin Kaepernick, who is genuinely and gravely concerned about what is happening to justice for African Americans in the United States,” Ken Burns said. “That we’ve been able to contort this is the worst kind of behavior. When this happens, you’ve abdicated democratic response, and when you have a charlatan-in-chief, who lies in office every day, we end up with tribal responses instead of civil ones.”

The gesture of protesting injustice through the American flag only exacerbates a tension that has always existed not just anecdotally but in real time. It is the black police organizations, Eric Adams’s and De Lacy Davis’s, that were most outspoken on police brutality, and it’s the largely black and brown officers who publicly supported Colin Kaepernick—and their public support has been erased from virtually every conversation regarding his protest, their position diminished because it didn’t conform. The black officers who decry police brutality are suddenly treated not as cops but rogues. The lines have been drawn along race and class, and they are sharp.

The authoritarian presence of Donald Trump only intensified the fraying, for while he did not create the theater, he has determined the characters, taking an ahistorical view for the sake of emotion, positioning the athletes with real concerns about the direction of the country against it. In a sense, what is occurring today is consistent with history. “It’s the America ‘Love it or leave it’ kneejerk from Vietnam all over again,” Burns said.

The original elders of the Heritage were once called unpatriotic only to be vindicated by history, but, asked Toni Smith-Thompson, “How much

progress have we really made? When you think about it, the response to those who challenge, from the 1960s with Muhammad Ali, Tommie and John; for what Mahmoud and I went through, to Colin Kaepernick today, has been the same. It hasn't changed."

It is unlikely that sports will return to its pre-9/11 dynamics—less nationalism, less crass commercialism, less hero worship—because no one, not fans, not leagues, and not players, is asking it to. The popular culture, sports as well as movies and, to a certain extent, music, has accepted today's template with no plan for rollback. The flags and flyovers, as baseball writer Jack O'Connell said, is similar to the day in the late 1960s when metal detectors showed up at airports and have remained ever since.

"Is it all overdone? Yes. Do we need to do it? No, but who's going to go first?" one baseball executive told me. "Can you imagine the criticism a team is going to face the minute somebody realizes we didn't salute the troops? It would depend on the regional market, but seriously, no one is going to risk that."

Much of the reason is that authoritarianism has already become normalized, embedded. For all the player protest, not one has indicted the militarized spectacle their day jobs have become.

"I think this is who we are. I think this is who we've always been, and 9/11 was just an opportunity to reveal itself," Smith-Thompson said, adding that "9/11 only provided the rare opportunity to show who America is when America is on the receiving end of what it does. We value pretense. America is white supremacy, capitalism, and pretense. We don't care what the reality is. We care more what it looks like. We are proud of plastic surgery when everyone knows it's not our real face."

SKIN IN THE GAME

Even though he did not play a down, the specter of Colin Kaepernick would test NFL players. Before the season began, Goodell had been in communication with Philadelphia Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins, who had immersed himself in the issues of police community relations after the deaths of Castile and Sterling. Jenkins was not a kneeler, opting to raise a fist during the national anthem, an ode to the black-gloved 1968 Olympic protest of Smith and Carlos. Jenkins began discussing initiatives with Goodell and his player liaison, Troy Vincent. The players created a

massive group chat allowing them to communicate openly and collaboratively. The group called itself the Players Coalition. As Trump attacked, they seemed ready to unify.

Though several of the owners had bankrolled Trump's campaign, they recognized that the president's "sons of bitches" rhetoric had produced an uprising (and when it comes to labor peace, worker revolts are generally not awesome), and *even the owners were kneeling*. Before a Cowboys-Cardinals *Monday Night Football* game on September 25, there was Cowboys owner Jerry Jones suddenly on one knee looking like a Freedom Rider—or an informant.

Privately, owners were nervous of what a unified front of players could do. Would the Kaepernick protest evolve into a unity NFL players had never had before? Would the NFL represent another proving ground in the post-Ferguson athletic awakening where, as the NBA players had done in ousting the LA Clippers' Donald Sterling and the University of Missouri football team had done in its protest, the athletes would flex and shift the balance?

In meeting with the owners, players, specifically Josh Norman of the Washington Redskins, reminded the owners of their million-dollar contributions to the Trump campaign (including one from Daniel Snyder, the owner of his team). They reminded the owners that they had allowed the players to be savaged by the public and the president. And they reminded ownership of another critical detail: "We haven't forgotten Kaep doesn't have a job," Philadelphia Eagles defensive end Chris Long said. "He deserves a job."

There was one additional problem to this tidy partnership with the NFL and its new Players Coalition: no NFL team was willing to offer Kaepernick a chance to play. But the Players Coalition continued negotiating with the league to partner on a social justice platform. Individual players, such as Michael Bennett of the Seattle Seahawks, Russell Okung of the Los Angeles Chargers, Eric Reid of the San Francisco 49ers, and Michael Thomas of the Miami Dolphins, believed Kaepernick being out of work should have been a priority. But neither the Players Coalition nor the players' union, the NFLPA, was willing to couple cooperation on protest initiatives to Kaepernick's employment status, and it was the curious decoupling of him from the owners that gave Reid pause. Why were players negotiating with the very owners who had denied Kaepernick

employment for the past eight months? Maybe, Reid thought, this wasn't a transformative moment at all. Maybe this was a setup and the owners were playing divide and conquer.

Malcolm Jenkins of the Philadelphia Eagles did not believe in the need for Kaepernick's job status to be coupled to gaining concessions from the owners. The two were separate, he thought. Besides, the movement was bigger than Kaepernick. Kaepernick had said so himself. Jenkins's goal was to secure resources from billionaire owners to create change. Yet to Reid, something was gnawing at him about the whole thing, and it started with a distrust of Jenkins. Reid's first real suspicion was that the coalition was not representative of the players but the hand-picked moderate, alternative to Kaepernick that ownership would use to buy off the protests. The kneelers slowly began to wonder about the coalition's tactics. Reid did not like the direct contact between Goodell and Jenkins, and he believed the movement should be more collaborative. Reid also did not like that Jenkins positioned himself as the leader of the coalition and told Kaepernick so, setting off tension between Jenkins and Kaepernick. When Kaepernick's lawyers asked Jenkins to document his claim that Kaepernick had been invited to meetings, Jenkins sent a message to the group chat on October 28 that read, "Heads up guys. I removed Kap from this chat. His attorneys have been contacting me and it seems clear to me that he is not interested in working under the coalition. I think it's important that we keep him involved in what we do and he will still be invited to meetings that we have. But in regards to our decision making and communications between members of the coalition, I think its [*sic*] important to keep these things in house in the spirit of solidarity." Okung, who was not a kneeler, sent a message to Jenkins saying that "I support your decision fully and look forward to us being intentional about our purpose."

Reid had been skeptical since the first New York meeting when Buffalo Bills owner Terry Pegula, who also owns the NHL's Buffalo Sabres, said that his hockey team had lost two sponsors due to protest of the Bills. Pegula said owners and players needed a joint plan on social issues, which needed a face—a black face. Why, Reid wondered, would the NFL need to create a "face" for its initiatives when, across the country, Kaepernick was the clear and obvious one? Pegula nominated Anquan Boldin, the former star wide receiver who had finished his career in Buffalo. Reid suggested Kaepernick. "If there's going to be a face to this, it needs to be

Colin,” Reid recalled saying in the meeting. “I’m going to keep bringing this back to Colin, and we aren’t talking about Colin enough.” The room did not respond.

Reid saw the kneelers as the catalyst for the movement, and the ones taking the greatest personal risk with their careers. Kaepernick was out of the league, and his own contract had expired after the season ended. Veteran cornerback Antonio Cromartie, another kneeler, was released by the Chargers after kneeling for the first month of the 2016 season and was never signed by another team. Jenkins would say that it was the work that players had done in their communities for years that got the positive attention of the owners, and he made no distinction in commitment or risk between sitting, raising a fist, or kneeling. As an example, Jenkins pointed to defensive end Damontre Moore, who was cut by Dallas after raising his fist during the national anthem in October 2017. “Talk to security at the stadium and ask them if the public appreciates my gesture,” Jenkins said.

Reid thought differently. It was the kneeling and the effect of the kneeling on the business of the NFL that made any financial partnership with owners possible, and yet he felt like he had nominal input and influence. There was only one reason any owner was talking to them—the kneeling had negatively defined football, and the owners were using the Players Coalition to put a stop to it.

It was all about skin in the game, who had it and who didn’t. Reid looked at the coalition and saw players—Josh McCown of the Jets and Aeneas Williams, a retired Hall of Famer—in leadership positions. Chris Long was a coalition member who *did* have skin in the game. He was the most outspoken white male player in America, both in his solidarity with black players and in his commitment to fight for an America he saw slipping away. Long was a member of the 2014 Los Angeles Rams when the five black players emerged from the tunnel during the Ferguson protests. With the New England Patriots, he was an outspoken supporter of Kaepernick, and when New England won the Super Bowl over Atlanta, two things happened: Long didn’t join the team at the White House in protest of Trump, and his phone didn’t ring in the offseason. Long was eventually signed by Philadelphia—because he called them and asked for work. “It wasn’t just having won a Super Bowl. I was top five or ten in the league in pressures. I got sixty career sacks. That’s most on most teams. I would have understood no calls coming off two injury-ridden seasons

in St. Louis—I looked out of gas. But after that year, my phone blew up. After a healthy, productive year in New England? Zero calls.”

Reid feared the movement was being hijacked by owners who wanted to control the allocation of money. It all felt like public relations, not an organic grassroots moment. “I’m not here for the owners’ money,” he would say. Then came the moment that, in Reid’s words, made his “head explode,” and his suspicions about the coalition were realized. It came November 29 in the form of a text message from Jenkins to the group that, to Reid, read like the bribe he had long been suspected was the owners’ intention for the Players Coalition all along: to get the kneelers to stop kneeling.

“Fellas, I’m going to send an email (and copy you in it) to RG [Goodell] and TV [Vincent] asking that we be allowed to contribute to the matching funds from our own foundations and have it count toward player contributions,” Jenkins’s text read. “I’m also going to ask them how soon will they be ready to act on this commitment. We’d like a donation ASAP for us to act in good faith, as we’d be waiting until March to get the actual commitment for the local matching funds. If they were to agree to this do you think you’d be more comfortable with ending the demonstrations?”

Reid was stunned. He felt misled, sold out. He was already frustrated—that though he had never been elected by the group, Jenkins had appointed himself as the leader of the coalition, and that media continued to paint Jenkins and Boldin as *responsible* and *legitimate*, and Reid and the other kneelers as *unreasonable* and *uncompromising*. And now, not only did the text read to him as if Jenkins were asking for money to stop kneeling but that Jenkins himself (and not the owners) was initiating the idea. By virtue of asking the NFL for a donation, Reid thought, Jenkins was *literally selling out the protest*. Days later, when the Players Coalition and the NFL would announce an \$89 million partnership over seven years to support criminal justice reform initiatives, Jenkins said that, though other players were still able to protest, he would cease doing so. There was one other damning detail that made him look like a proxy for the owners: it turned out he owned a Papa John’s franchise, the anti-protest and former official “pizza provider” of the NFL. That day, Reid, Thomas, and Peters quit the coalition. Okung did, too, but not before calling it a “farce.”

The fracturing of the Players Coalition would often be characterized as a personality clash or, more romantically, as an example of the age-old

collision of working within the system against working outside of it. The coalition willingly made a business deal with the power. Instead of taking power, as the players did in the Missouri and Donald Sterling cases, the NFL players were more in a sense like Lewis and Vick, closely tied to the owners' money without sharing any autonomy. The truth is that the players never sufficiently reconciled the specter of Kaepernick. Jenkins resented the charge that the coalition sold out, but by never confronting the owners directly on Kaepernick, they were willing to trade the human cost of Kaepernick's apparent banishment from the NFL not just for money but for ownership's money. Kaepernick hadn't played all season, but his specter overshadowed the NFL. Even when he wasn't there, he was there.

"The reason I have such a cautious view is because [players] never said anything about Colin Kaepernick, and he's in your own profession," Al Sharpton said. "So, you can impress the fans, but I'm looking at it this way: if you're real, if you're really real, how did you let this brother sit there and you didn't say nothing? And the only one who said something was Vick saying he should have cut his afro. How ridiculous was that, no matter how innocently he said it? And why weren't there ten of y'all out there saying it was wrong?"

"YOU OWE BECAUSE YOU RECEIVED"

The Heritage has been reborn, for now, living in heart within the tenuous space reserved for the dissidents and the patriots, the unpopular and the committed. After decades of silence, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is writing with the free hand of the liberated. In body, however, the Heritage lives within the complicated, conflicting world of super-rich modern athletes, far removed from the proletariat by the zeroes on their paycheck. They are individual corporations and brands, often aligned with the power, yet collectively so powerful that they could halt college athletics with a single movement. Their choice, governed by the billions they impact, is a daily one: peacemakers or protesters.

After immigration and integration, the third act of sports has been the ultimate victory of the dollar, and the mission of this capitalism runs counter to every tenet of dissidence and principle. Paul Robeson knew this. Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali knew it—and in a sense so did

OJ, Michael, and Tiger, though they chose to apply that knowledge quite differently.

“I just love the freedom and the flesh and blood of my people more so than I do the money,” Muhammad Ali said in 1971. “You can take your show and play it right in Washington, let Nixon hear it. And I’ll be happy. So this boldness and telling the truth overshadows sports greatly.”

The Heritage was never about sports but about America making sports—quite specifically the black body in this country—so economically and socially important that the people needed the player to be present for them. This is the inheritance of the black athlete, his coat of arms, and no contract or endorsement deal has yet ever been big enough to make that obligation go away. It is a responsibility the black player will carry until America values the black brain over the black body, and the black people, like all the others, rise through education and not touchdowns. Then sports for black people can finally be reduced to what it should have always been in the first place—just a game.