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THE WAR ON AMERICA'S MIDDLE CLASS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNITY

A Special Editorial by J. R. de Szigethy

The unprecedented scale of recent protests by members of the National Football League, in which players dropped to their knees, or, in some cases, hid in their locker rooms, during the playing of our National Anthem, has been purportedly a “stand” against racism and police brutality. Angry sports fans across America have responded by boycotting NFL games, with many such burning their favorite team's tickets, jerseys and other memorabilia. Some players have countered that such fans are motivated by racism.

None of this is true; the protests by the players have largely been motivated by politics, and the motivating factor behind the fan's backlash has not been racists beliefs, but rather the abandonment by the Management, Coaches, and players of the NFL of the very core belief systems that the fans have embraced for decades; the values of the American Middle Class.

The American Middle Class arose in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. The values of this Class included a strong work Ethic, respect for God and country, and self-discipline over one's body. The participation of young people in team sports, primarily baseball and football, was regarded as a reliable enterprise in which to instill such Class values on the next generation. The fruits of this new and expanding Middle Class was an unprecedented prosperity that propelled the United States into its pre-eminence as the model for Democracy and Capitalism worldwide. Today, over a half of a Century later, the American Middle Class is in decline in terms of their economic power, their political power, and their ability to promote their values and standards of morality upon American Society.

Anyone who grew up in the South after WWII can attest as to whom the perpetrators of racism were in their own communities. Whenever someone got arrested for committing crimes against people of color, those criminals were invariably NOT members of the American Middle Class. Few doors of opportunity were open during that time to

Blacks and Hispanics. The notable exception was the entertainment industry, which included not just radio, television, and motion pictures, but professional sports as well. Baseball and football, among other sports, are, after all, entertainment. By the end of the war, Jesse Owens and Joe Louis were already national heroes - to the Middle Class - to be joined by those such as Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in professional baseball in 1947.

The burgeoning television industry during the 1950s brought professional sports into American homes. Popular television programs reflected the Middle Class respect for the law enforcement community, and offered a venue by which athletes could “cross-over” to the Hollywood entertainment industry. Chuck Connors was one such, turning his stature as a professional basketball AND professional baseball athlete to a later career as an actor, notably as television's “The Rifleman.” As the decades progressed, many professional athletes followed Connor's career path.

Hollywood, American athletics, and the country as a whole began to change – for the worse – with the influx of “recreational drugs,” notably cocaine, during the 1980s. This trend was at odds with the key role religion played in the American Middle Class doctrine. Proponents of this Class held that the human body was considered to be “God's Temple,” not to be denigrated within by the use of drugs, nor desecrated externally through piercing or tattoos. From the 1980s onward, all three practices crept into the world of athletics.

In June, 1986, America was shocked by the cocaine overdose death of top Professional Basketball Draft pick Len Bias. The rising star was just 22 years old. 10 years later, Hollywood released the film “Jerry Maguire,” which depicted how professional sports in America had become a multi-billion dollar a year enterprise, bringing with it the advent of the “Super-Agent,” who sought to enrich his client, and himself, by the sophisticated marketing of that athlete's “Brand.”

Once Dollar became King of professional sports, the moral restraints of American Middle Class values were abandoned. For many athletes, the ultimate goal was not to become the best in their sport, but rather to achieve the best multi-million dollar endorsement contract from corporations hawking products such as athletic shoes, perfume, razor blades, and other consumer commodities. The achievements of some of America's best athletes - Lance Armstrong, Jose Canseco, Barry Bonds, Alex Rodriguez, Marion Jones, and Roger Clemens, among others, would be tarnished by allegations of the use of illegal performance enhancing drugs. When New England Patriots star Aaron Hernandez, who had been acquired by a \$40 million Contract, was arrested on murder charges in 2013, journalists covering this story quickly discovered that among the numerous tattoos on his body was one of the “Bloods,” an American drug trafficking gang, and the fact that Hernandez was an habitual abuser of drugs, including marijuana and PCP.

Hernandez' lifestyle was in stark contrast to his former teammate Tim Tebow, who won the Heisman Trophy while the 2 played for the University of Florida. Tebow went on to become the enormously popular Quarterback who guided the Denver Broncos to the playoffs in 2011. Despite this, Tebow is the only Quarterback in NFL history who started in a Playoff game under the age of 30 who subsequently never started again in the regular season. Many of his fans believe he was discriminated against by some in the NFL because his squeaky-clean, All-American Christian image no longer reflected what the NFL had come to value.

At the beginning of the 2016 season, San Francisco 49ers Quarterback Colin Kaepernick began to kneel rather than stand during the playing of the National Anthem in the opening ceremony of his football games. Kaepernick stated he was acting in solidarity with the Black Lives Movement, which spontaneously arose nationwide in response to a series of police-involved shootings of minorities. Kaepernick received support from over 40 NFL players, who also took a knee during the Anthem's playing. An angry backlash by fans resulted in the ratings for the 2016 season dropping around 10 percent from the previous year. In October, Presidential candidate Donald Trump began to address the issue in his campaign appearances. However, Trump was significantly down in virtually every poll so his pronouncements on the NFL Anthem issue did not receive a lot of Media attention.

What was receiving the Media's attention was the unprecedented surge in the shootings of police around the country. 64 Police Officers were gunned down in 2016, many execution style, an increase of over 50% from the year previous. According to newly released crime statistics by the FBI, 7,881 African-Americans were killed in 2016. 233 of those were killed by Police, with 217 of those shootings the result of armed confrontations. Milwaukee, Wisconsin Sheriff David Clarke famously addressed the fact that it was African-Americans – not Police Officers - who were responsible for the vast majority of the killings of fellow African-Americans. “Black LIES Matter!,” the Sheriff proclaimed, in response to the narrative being promoted by the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

By the start of the 2017 NFL season, a few players refused to stand for the National Anthem. Once again, Donald Trump denounced such actions. This year, however, the situation was much different; Trump was now President, and every word of his was pounced upon by the Media. On Sunday, September 24, dozens of NFL players dropped to their knees during the National Anthem. Many were supported by their Coaches and staff. Many fans booed from the stands and some have promoted a personal and national boycott of NFL games.

Their response to this American phenomenon is not about race; it is about values; American Middle-Class values. What has been simmering for over 2 decades has finally boiled over. The American Middle Class looks at professional athletes, their coaches, and their team Management, and they do not see a reflection of themselves nor the values they live by. They recognize that in their lifetimes television heroes such as Chuck Connors and James Arness have slowly been replaced by the likes of the Kardashians. Muhammad Ali and Roger Staubach have been replaced by the likes of Aaron Hernandez and Lance Armstrong.

What these former NFL fans can take some comfort in is that there is still a profession which embraces Middle Class values, and that is the profession of law enforcement. Those athletes on their knees enjoy the freedom to do so because of the sacrifices made on their behalf by the men and women of America's law enforcement community. Over 20,000 Police Officers have been killed in the line of duty since the founding of the United States of America. For them, this is not a game, but a way of life, which far too often ends in their death.

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