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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Politicization of Everything

Everybody loses in the Trump-NFL brawl over the national anthem.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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Baltimore Ravens players kneel during the playing of the U.S. national anthem before an NFL football game against the Jacksonville Jaguars at Wembley Stadium in London, Sunday Sept. 24, 2017.

PHOTO: MATT DUNHAM/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Healthy democracies have ample room for politics but leave a larger space for civil society and culture that unites more than divides. With the politicization of the National Football League and the national anthem, the Divided States of America are exhibiting a very unhealthy level of polarization and mistrust.

The progressive forces of identity politics started this poisoning of America's favorite spectator sport last year by making a hero of Colin Kaepernick for refusing to stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner" before games. They raised the stakes this year by turning him into a progressive martyr because no team had picked him up to play quarterback after he opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers.

The NFL is a meritocracy, and maybe coaches and general managers thought he wasn't good enough for the divisions he might cause in a locker room or among fans. But the left said it was all about race and class.

All of this is cultural catnip for [Donald Trump](#), who pounced on Friday night at a rally and on the weekend on [Twitter](#) with his familiar combination of gut political instinct, rhetorical excess, and ignorance. "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now,

out, he's fired. He's fired,'" Mr. Trump said Friday.

No doubt most Americans agree with Mr. Trump that they don't want their flag disrespected, especially by millionaire athletes. But Mr. Trump never stops at reasonable, and so he called for kneeling players to be fired or suspended, and if the league didn't comply for fans to "boycott" the NFL.

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He also plunged into the debate over head injuries without a speck of knowledge about the latest brain science, claiming that the NFL was "ruining the game" by trying to stop dangerous physical hits. This is the kind of rant you'd hear in a lousy sports bar.

Mr. Trump has managed to unite the players and owners against him, though several owners supported him for President and donated to his inaugural. The owners were almost obliged to defend their sport, even if their complaints that Mr. Trump was "divisive" ignored the divisive acts by Mr. Kaepernick and his media allies that injected politics into football in the first place.

Americans don't begrudge athletes their free-speech rights—see the popularity of Charles Barkley—but disrespecting the national anthem puts partisanship above a symbol of nationhood that thousands have died for. Players who chose to kneel shouldn't be surprised that fans around the country booed them on Sunday. This is the patriotic sentiment that they are helping Mr. Trump exploit for what he no doubt thinks is his own political advantage.

American democracy was healthier when politics at the ballpark was limited to fans booing politicians who threw out the first ball—almost as a bipartisan obligation. This showed a healthy skepticism toward the political class. But now the players want to be politicians and use their fame to lecture other Americans, the parsons of the press corps want to make them moral spokesmen, and the President wants to run against the players.

The losers are the millions of Americans who would rather cheer for their teams on Sunday as a respite from work and the other divisions of American life.

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