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POLITICS

Why We Should All Take A Knee For Black And **Brown Children**

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Fall has arrived. The air is crisp, pumpkins adorn doorsteps and leaves are turning beautiful colors. Fall also means football season, and since the first kickoff, we've been seeing some other interesting colors — the true colors of football coaches, owners and fans.

Recently, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, for example, boasted that he would bench any player in his organization who "disrespects the flag" during the national anthem. This, of course, stems from a backlash to a smattering of player protests throughout the NFL in the last few weeks, including locked arms, bent knees and refusals to leave the locker room by such teams as the Seattle Seahawks, Pittsburgh Steelers, Oakland Raiders and even the Washington team (mascot name withheld out of respect for Native Americans).

Never mind that the Colin Kaepernick-spawned demonstrations have nothing to do with disrespect for the flag but rather disrespect for black and brown lives, the dog-whistling Jones is doing with his threats is sadly familiar. Controlling the movements of vlack bodies has long been a calling card of slave owners, bigots and white supremacists of all stripes. When a black person steps outside of his "place," rightly reaching for his freedom, he is slapped back down by sanctions and restrictions at best, bodily harm or even death, at worst. This football furor is cloaked in a shroud of "good business practice," but really, it is just more of the same.

Kaepernick and his colleagues' actions are not aggressive acts. Instead, they are of quiet contemplation against historical racism stretching all the way back to Francis Scott Key; their locked arms and bent knees show solidarity for those injured on the field and those who have lost their lives to police brutality and other racist acts. Their demonstrations are as peaceful as any such acts can be. And yet, there is backlash. And punishment. And a collective, willful misunderstanding of why the players are protesting in the first place.

Compare that to the reaction to gun-toting, tiki torch-wielding, anti-Semitic-sign-bearing white supremacists marching through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia this summer. In August, a parade of hundreds of neo-Nazis and far-right sympathizers descended on the normally quiet city — home to Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia — in defense of a statue of Robert E. Lee, of Confederacy fame. Epithets were spewed, violence ensued and a woman — a counter-protestor — was killed, run over by the speeding car of an angry white man who barreled through a crowd.

Our president's response to such hatred, mayhem and death? He condemned bad actors "on many sides," including, it's implied, those fighting against racism.

What then was President Trump's response to kneeling football players? He said owners should fire them for peacefully protesting racism and police brutality.

"Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. He's fired. He's fired!" Trump said the owners should exclaim. "For a week, (that owner would) be the most popular person in this country. Because that's a total disrespect of our heritage. That's a total disrespect for everything we stand for."

Despite the voices who have suggested we have entered a post-racial America, clearly racism in this country is alive and well. The mind boggles at how long we've been fighting the same fights.

Sixty-three years ago, this country officially registered its distaste for racism by overturning the Plessy v. Ferguson constitutional law that kept black children from being educated in the company of white children in the public schools. Yet, even after the violent clash

between white supremacists and counter-demonstrators in Charlottesville, white nationalists have followed up with a series of smaller but equally as reprehensible gatherings — even going back to the city where Heather Heyer, the 32-year-old woman who was run over by a bigot's car, was killed.

In what Michelle Alexander has called "The New Jim Crow," police continue to profile black and brown citizens for punitive stop and frisks — often because of nothing more than skin color profiling. As early as preschool, black children, in several studies, have been found to be confronted with implicit bias, disciplined by their teachers for behaviors that go overlooked for white children. Academic disparities also hold true when comparing the performances of children of color to those of white students. And then there are the disparities in opportunity for people of color in jobs, food, housing and transportation. I could go on.

As a man of color, the bias and unfair treatment rankles. But as an educator, I worry more about the effects that a national climate of racism has on black and brown children whose young brains are so easily damaged by the ignoring of — or outright injuries to — their academic and social trajectories.

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I think about how this national racism affects their brains, and their belief in themselves. This is not touchy-feely stuff; this is science. We know that stereotypes become threats to achievement, producing a flood of cortisol from the hypothalamus and pituitary glands where the flood of this chemical can damage learning and memory, just as the floods of hurricanes can turn life-sustaining water into a life-threatening weapon.

In just two decades we will be a nation of so-called "minorities," black, brown, Asian, multiracial. Will we learn then to embrace diversity — the multi-hued tapestry that makes nations stronger? Or will the sports stars still kneel? Will the torch-carrying racists still march and maim? When will we learn?

When Colin Kaepernick kneels during the national anthem, he is taking a knee for black lives — but not just the ones so frequently maligned in the BLM movement. He is also taking a knee for all the little children who are suffering from an opportunity gap — the percentage of which will only grow as the country browns.

The national racism stoked by the words of our current president and administration has to stop or we will be more divided, more disconnected than ever.

And that's something that should bring us all to our knees.

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