

New England Patriots players plan to boycott meeting with Trump

By Alan Gilman
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Six players from the Super Bowl LI champion New England Patriots have announced they will not attend a White House visit to be held in their honor.

Since the National Football League (NFL) franchise won a historic fifth Super Bowl on February 5th, a growing number of players on the team have told the press that they would turn down an invitation to commemorate their victory at the White House.

As has been a long-standing tradition, the President invites the championship team from each major professional sports league to the White House each year to honor their achievement.

In anticipation of this invitation tight end Martellus Bennett was the first player to announce he would not join his teammates at any future White House celebration. Bennett made it very clear that Trump was the impetus for the decision by his twitter statement: “America was built on inclusiveness not exclusiveness.”

Bennett was later joined by defensive back Devin McCourty (who also participated in a silent, fists-raised National Anthem protest with Bennett during the regular season), who said: “Basic reason for me is I don’t feel accepted in the White House. With the president having so many strong opinions and prejudices, I believe certain people might feel accepted there while others won’t.”

These sentiments were also echoed by running back LeGarrette Blount, who during his appearance on the Rich Eisen Show explained his position: “I don’t feel welcome in that house. I’ll leave it at that.”

Meanwhile Dont’a Hightower, Chris Long, and Alan Branch have now all also said they would turn down a request to come to the White House, but did not cite political motivations. And running back James White has said he is considering skipping the trip, but will

wait until an invite is put forward to decide.

The New England Patriots, the most successful NFL franchise during the last fifteen years, is known for its strict discipline and insisting that its players avoid any off-the-field controversy or distractions.

The three major architects of this philosophy, owner Robert Kraft, head coach Bill Belichick, and future Hall of Fame quarterback Tom Brady, all ignored their own edict by publicly expressing their support for Trump.

During the regular season Brady put one of Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again caps in his locker and also referred to Trump as “a good friend.” Belichick wrote a letter of support to Trump that was read aloud by Trump at one of his campaign rallies. Kraft also made public statements of support for Trump, claiming the new president would be great for the “economic side” of America.

Speaking at a dinner for campaign donors in Washington, D.C. on the eve of his inauguration, Trump singled out Kraft, saying, “In the audience, we have somebody that’s under no pressure whatsoever cause he’s got a great quarterback named Tom Brady, and a great coach, and a great coach named Belichick: Bob Kraft. So good luck, Bob. Your friend Tom just called. He feels good. He called to congratulate us. He feels good. Good luck. You’re going to do great things.”

Kraft joined Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for dinner at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Florida estate last Friday.

It is not unprecedented for athletes to decline a White House invitation. Tom Brady after New England’s 2015 Super Bowl victory did not attend the Obama White House invitation—without publicly giving a reason why. Moreover, Presidents George W. Bush,

Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan have all experienced an occasional athlete declining a similar invitation.

What distinguishes these New England Patriots players, however, is that most of them have publicly expressed their strong political opposition to Trump as their reason for declining an invitation that is expected, but has not yet even been formally extended.

Bennett's feelings were so strong that in the week leading up to the Super Bowl he announced that if New England won he would not be going to the White House. His views as well as those of many of his teammates are yet another illustration of the high degree of political tension, polarization, and unease that permeates society in the wake of the 2016 presidential race and the reactionary policies being pursued by the Trump administration.

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