

Leaked audio tapes reveal NFL owners feared both Trump and player protests

By Alan Gilman
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The tape recording of a secret meeting last October between NFL owners and players was leaked to the *New York Times* last week, which published large extracts. The extraordinary meeting was convened to discuss the national anthem protests and President Donald Trump's attempt to make political hay out of them by whipping up right-wing and chauvinistic sentiment.

The players who attended wanted to press their concerns over the blackballing of quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who had initiated these protests at the start of the 2016 season. One of the most outspoken players at the meeting, safety Eric Reid, appears to have become the second top player to find himself on an informal blacklist because of his political views.

Reid, a teammate of Kaepernick's on the San Francisco 49ers in 2016 who stayed with the team after Kaepernick became a free agent, filed a grievance against the league this week. He is charging that the owners were engaged in collusion, shown by the refusal of any one of the 32 teams to make a contract offer when he became a free agent in March. Reid was a first-round pick by the 49ers in 2013 and made the Pro Bowl that year. He has continued to play at a high level and would have expected heavy bidding for his services now that he has completed his first four-year contract and become a free agent.

Kaepernick has filed a similar lawsuit, pointing out that at least a dozen teams have passed on making a contract bid when they had need of a new quarterback, invariably taking a less qualified player who was not linked to the anthem protests. Kaepernick began kneeling during the anthem in 2016 to protest police killings of African-Americans. Many of his teammates and players from other teams began engaging in similar protests.

The anthem protests during last season's first two weeks involved relatively few players, and the issue seemingly had dissipated. Then on September 22, 2017, two days before week three's games, Trump exhorted an

ultra-right crowd in Alabama by bellowing, "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."

Trump's provocative threats enraged the players who responded during that weekend's games by engaging in widespread anthem protests that involved many more players, and in some cases entire teams. Many of the owners, fearing they would lose control of their players, who are 70 percent African-American, joined with their players in issuing "unifying" statements of support, and in some instances agreeing to kneel with their players before the anthem and then rising in unison as the anthem was played.

By the following week, the matter had again seemingly subsided as most teams took a unified response, having all players kneel in unison before the anthem and then standing in unison during the playing of the anthem. Other teams had players' link arms during the anthem. Several players from various teams, however, continued to kneel or raise fists, while a few others chose to remain in the locker room during the anthem.

With the anthem issue once again dying down, Trump on October 8, 2017 sent Vice President Mike Pence to Indianapolis to attend the San Francisco 49ers-Indianapolis Colts game in Indianapolis. San Francisco was Colin Kaepernick's former team, and several of his teammates had continued to kneel during the anthem and had indicated they would be doing so for the rest of the season.

Immediately following the anthem, in which several San Francisco players knelt, Pence and his wife, in a pre-planned walkout, left the stadium and issued a tweet. "I left today's Colts game because I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem. ..."

Trump then chimed in on Twitter, writing: "I asked

[Vice President Pence] to leave stadium if any players kneeled, disrespecting our country. I am proud of him and [Second Lady] Karen.”

Trump tweeted two days later, “Why is the NFL getting massive tax breaks while at the same time disrespecting our Anthem, Flag and Country? Change tax law!”

It was with this background that in mid-October NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell summoned both owners and leading players for a rare joint meeting. The *Times* obtained an audio recording of this three-hour meeting that began with Goodell declaring, “Let’s make sure that we keep this confidential.”

To appease the players, the owners began by offering to finance nonprofit groups to address player concerns. Then the billionaire owners focused on their principal concern, how these protests were affecting their bottom line. The owners claimed that because of the anthem protests their business was facing multiple attacks ranging from advertisers threatening to pull their sponsorships, to declining TV ratings that they blamed on the protests, and supposed threats of a fan boycott.

The players, however, wanted to talk about why Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who started the anthem protests, was being blackballed by the owners. “If he was on a roster right now, all this negativeness and divisiveness could be turned into a positive,” Philadelphia Eagles defensive lineman Chris Long said at the meeting. Long said he did not wish to “lecture any team” on what quarterbacks to sign, but “we all agree in this room as players that he should be on a roster.”

Eric Reid, Kaepernick’s former teammate and the first player to kneel alongside him, also said that his former teammate was being blackballed. “I feel like he was hung out to dry. Everyone in here is talking about how much they support us. Nobody stepped up and said we support Colin’s right to do this. We all let him become Public Enemy No. 1 in this country, and he still doesn’t have a job.”

Not one owner would touch the issue of why Kaepernick was still unemployed, despite his former status as a major star at the most demanding position in professional football. It was clear that while they resented Trump’s intervention as a threat to their profits, they all essentially agreed with his demand that the protests end.

The New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, who is a close friend of Donald Trump and one of the six NFL owners who contributed \$1 million or more to Trump’s Inaugural Committee, pointed to the “elephant in the room ... this kneeling.” He continued, “The problem we

have is, we have a president who will use that as fodder to do his mission that I don’t feel is in the best interests of America. It’s divisive and it’s horrible.”

Philadelphia Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie then said, “We’ve got to be careful not to be baited by Trump or whomever else. We have to find a way to not be divided and not get baited.”

The Buffalo Bills owner Terry Pegula expressed the owners’ anxiety and uncertainty over Trump’s public attacks: “All Donald needs to do is to start to do this again. We need some kind of immediate plan because of what’s going on in society. All of us now, we need to put a Band-Aid on what’s going on in the country.”

Houston Texans owner Bob McNair directly urged the players to tell their colleagues to, essentially, end their protests. “You fellas need to ask your compadres, fellas, stop that other business, let’s go out and do something that really produces positive results, and we’ll help you.”

Later in the week, during an owners-only meeting, McNair went on to advise his fellow owners, “We can’t have the inmates running the prison.”

After the owners-players meeting the league issued a sanitized joint statement indicating the owners and players had a “productive meeting on how we can work together to promote social change and address inequality on our communities.”

The tape-recording reveals the real interests that underlay this disingenuous public statement in support of their players’ concerns about social injustices. They were worried about any threat to their accumulation of ever-greater amounts of wealth from Trump and his ultra-right supporters. Their comments suggest, however, that the owners were feeling a greater danger than to their bottom line this season: that the protests against police killings could link up with and contribute to a deeper radicalization in the working class.

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