

Racism in sports: Drew Brees and whitewashing history

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Colin Kaepernick (center) and teammates kneel during the national anthem in 2016.

Since late May, oppressed and working-class people across the United States have risen up and rebelled against racism and the brutal police war on Black and Brown communities. From major metropolitan areas like Minneapolis and Washington, D.C., to more rural communities like Evansville, Ind., and Frederick, Md., thousands of people have taken to the streets demanding the end of racist police violence and, in many cases, of the police entirely.

This incredible movement against racism was born from righteous outrage at the police murder of George Floyd. Floyd's name has become a rallying cry against the racism that is at the heart of the U.S. capitalism system.

In light of this, the professional sports industry has been forced to revisit the controversy of Colin Kaepernick's 2016 protest.

Kaepernick debate renewed

During the 2016-2017 National Football League season, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem at the beginning of every game. This action was a protest against continued racism and police brutality in the U.S. in the wake of the police murders of Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Black and Brown people. Kaepernick was subsequently banned from the NFL.

Since George Floyd's murder, many athletes and public figures have made public statements about the continued relevance of Kaepernick's protest. National Basketball Association superstar LeBron James [posted a picture](#) of Kaepernick kneeling, juxtaposed with Minneapolis cop Derrick Chauvin pressing his knee onto Floyd's neck. James asked the world, "Do you understand NOW!???"

Unfortunately, not every professional athlete was inclined towards justice and anti-racism. In an interview, a Yahoo Finance reporter asked [New Orleans Saints Quarterback Drew Brees](#) about the possibility of NFL players renewing kneeling protests in light of Floyd's murder. Brees' response was insensitive, pig-headed and racist.

Brees began his response stating, "I will never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag of the United States of America or our country." Unfortunately, he didn't stop there. Brees went on to discuss "what he feels" when he hears the national anthem and sees the U.S. flag.

At the center of Brees' opinions were his two grandfathers who served in the U.S. military during World War II. Essentially, Brees argued that no oppressed person should dare protest against the United States because Brees' white family members "fought for this country."

New Orleans a hub of Black culture

There's something glaring about Brees being the quarterback for the New Orleans Saints. New Orleans is a hub of Black culture and history. For Brees to entirely invalidate the racism and oppression the Black community has faced from the government represented by the U.S. flag and national anthem, while that same community has supported him in New Orleans for over a decade, seems particularly obtuse.

The question that quickly comes into mind is: Why exactly should oppressed communities in the U.S. respect its flag or anthem at all?

For hundreds of years, the U.S. and its symbols have been at the center of a global system that does nothing but murder, steal from and repress Black, Brown and Indigenous communities.

Whether it is the police occupation of Black neighborhoods here or military invasion of oppressed nations abroad, the U.S. ruling class has made its policy of racism abundantly clear. Not to mention chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the reservation system violently imposed upon Indigenous people, Japanese internment, Immigration and Customs Enforcement concentration camps, the racist war on drugs, mass incarceration, etc.

Fortunately, there was an anti-racist uproar in the sports community against Brees' statement. NBA star Stephen Jackson, a friend of George Floyd,



took to Instagram in support of Saints players who criticized Brees. Jackson spoke plainly: "Bad timing Drew Brees. You play for New Orleans ... all those Black people who support you, you need to be more sensitive of the timing ... you're either with us or you're on the other side."



The most powerful response came from New Orleans Saints safety Malcolm Jenkins. Jenkins opened his emotional statement, "Drew Brees, if you don't understand how hurtful and insensitive your comments are, you are part of the

problem.”

Jenkins continued, saying that it was ridiculous for Brees to expect everyone to have his same values because his white grandfathers fought in World War II. Jenkins directly attacked the insidious assumption at the center of Brees’ rationale, that all communities in the U.S. have the same historical and contemporary experiences.

Choking back tears, Jenkins continued: “Here we are now with the world on fire, and you continue to criticize how we protest because it doesn’t fit in your beliefs ... without ever acknowledging that a man was murdered in front of us all and it has been continuing for centuries. The same brothers you go to battle with every day [on the football field] go home to communities every day that have been decimated.”

Jenkins’ analysis highlights the racism at the core of Brees’ comments. For the past decade, Drew Brees has made millions of dollars throwing the football to majority Black wide receivers, being protected in the pocket by a majority Black offensive line, and handing the ball to majority Black running backs.

Sure, Brees is a great quarterback. But he has leaned on the backs of dozens of Black teammates over the years for his success. Yet, in a time of a tremendous countrywide movement against racism, after the brutal police murder of a handcuffed Black man, all Brees can do is spout his reactionary views without stopping to empathize with the Black community.

World War II, Black soldiers and capitalism

In Brees’ view, any protest against the symbols of a racist government are a direct affront to his grandfathers and other U.S. military veterans.

The problem with his view is two-pronged. First, Brees misunderstands the historical role of the U.S. military. The Pentagon doesn’t spread freedom and democracy across the globe. It simply sends thousands of workers to fight and kill other

workers to increase the coffers of bankers and other capitalists.

Second, Brees entirely ignores the historical experiences of Black soldiers in the U.S. military. Malcolm Jenkins also tackled this in his poignant response to Brees: “Drew, it shows that you don’t know history. Because when our grandfathers fought for this country, they didn’t come back to a hero’s welcome. They came back and got attacked for wearing their uniforms. They came back to racism and complete violence.”

Jenkins’ words have great historical weight. In the U.S. there exists a mythology around the white soldier, especially in regards to World War II. The U.S. military often falsely credits itself solely for the defeat of fascism and preservation of “global democracy.” Furthermore, U.S. capitalist society prides itself on “honoring the troops” and “remembering those who served.” But this is almost entirely for propaganda purposes. And it certainly doesn’t apply to soldiers who are Black, Brown, Indigenous or otherwise nationally oppressed.

The history of racism that Black soldiers experienced before, during and after World War II is [well documented](#). Black soldiers served in segregated units. In the small towns where they trained, usually in the South, they were often denied service by local businesses and were sometimes chased out of establishments.

Housing, food and equipment for Black soldiers were all of lower quality than that of their white counterparts. Black soldiers were also used as subjects in [brutal chemical weapons experiments](#) conducted by the military.

Once Black soldiers were deployed to Europe and the Pacific, the racism only intensified.

The case of the 92nd Infantry

A famous example is the case of the 92nd Infantry, which fought against the Italian

fascist forces of Benito Mussolini. In a 1987 University of Chicago Press article, Holocaust scholar Robert Kiesling detailed a racist conspiracy by white U.S. Army officers to discredit the 92nd's combat performance and place the unit in scenarios where it was set up to fail.

Kiesling details white officers not wanting to "waste their time" with Black soldiers. This meant watered-down training exercises, lack of training manuals and fewer requisitions for needed supplies. Furthermore, white officers higher in the chain of command regularly refused to reinforce the 92nd after it took losses in combat.

In one case, the 92nd Infantry was ordered to attack a heavily fortified Italian position even though they were completely depleted of machine gunners from their last engagement. The subsequent losses were devastating.

Time and time again, the members of the 92nd were sent forward as nothing more than human shields. The white commanders used their bodies and fighting spirit to determine the strength of the enemy. Then, better equipped white units would be sent forward to "save the day."

Over time, racist propaganda was spread through the military and the U.S., claiming that Black units just weren't capable of soldiering at the same level as their white counterparts. This campaign of lies was born from the racism at the heart of U.S. capitalism.

As if this abuse wasn't enough, Black soldiers had to tolerate the [incessant barrage of racist flyers](#) dropped from planes by Italian fascist and German Nazi troops. The message of these pamphlets was pointed and clear. They asked Black soldiers to lay down their weapons and stop fighting for a country with Jim Crow racism.

Jim Crow policies and lynchings were almost always mentioned. This strategy was certainly not based in actual critiques of racism, considering that the Nazi regime

was heavily inspired by the [eugenics movement](#) and [institutionalized racism](#) in the U.S. What made this strategy so horrifying was the imposition of psychological terror based on real material conditions that the Nazis knew Black soldiers faced back home.

The trials and tribulations of Black soldiers deployed by one racist army to fight against an even more racist army were immense. After experiencing intense racism from white officers and Nazi propaganda, these soldiers returned to a country still hell-bent on the superexploitation of oppressed people under apartheid-like conditions. This is the sort of struggle that Drew Brees fails to even consider.

Upon examination of this history — one all-too-well known by the Black community — Brees' comments seem only possible through racist ideology. The abusive racism experienced by Black soldiers in the U.S. military is not a secret. Nonetheless, Brees never stopped to consider anything but his narrow view of who he thinks really matters in this country.

Brees made it clear that he doesn't care about fighting racism. He doesn't care about justice for oppressed communities. The only thing that matters to Brees is a comfortable, whitewashed view of history that hides the true nature of U.S. capitalism.

Enter Trump

Following the righteous outrage of Black athletes, Brees issued a [series of apologies](#) for his statements. Brees lamented the insensitivity of his comments and affirmed his commitment to opposing racism.

Part of Brees' apology seemed to be a direct response to Malcolm Jenkins. Brees admitted he would never understand what it is like to be Black and to raise Black children, but, nonetheless, he would work to be more empathetic as the country

struggles against racism.

Shortly after Brees' public apology, President Donald Trump took to Twitter regarding the controversy. Trump stated he respected Brees but was disappointed he retracted the original statements.

One Trump tweet read: "We should be standing up straight and tall, ideally with a salute, or a hand on heart. There are other things you can protest, but not our Great American Flag — NO KNEELING!" This hard line "America first" attitude is on-brand for Trump, and came on the heels of Trump threatening to unleash the military on anti-racist protestors.

Brees [responded directly](#) to Trump on Instagram. His post was framed as an open letter to the president: "We can no longer use the flag to turn people away or distract them from the real issues that face our Black communities. We did this back in 2017, and regretfully, I brought it back with my comments this week. We must stop talking about the flag and shift our attention to the real issues of systemic racial injustice, economic oppression, police brutality, and judicial and prison reform."

This 180-degree turn by Brees and his public challenge to Trump's racism is certainly a positive development. However, the sea change has less to do with Brees personally and more so the anti-racist struggle that pushed him in the right direction.

Brees' original statements are still racist. Brees' still deserved the anger from his Black teammates. The political implications of his comments remain relevant and important to analyze.

With that said, it's important to acknowledge that his apology and break with Trump demonstrates a victory of the struggle. Several years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a white quarterback to back down from such a defiant display of

“patriotism.”

The fact that Drew Brees changed his tune and challenged Trump shows the immense strength of the working class and its ongoing struggle against racism and capitalism.

