

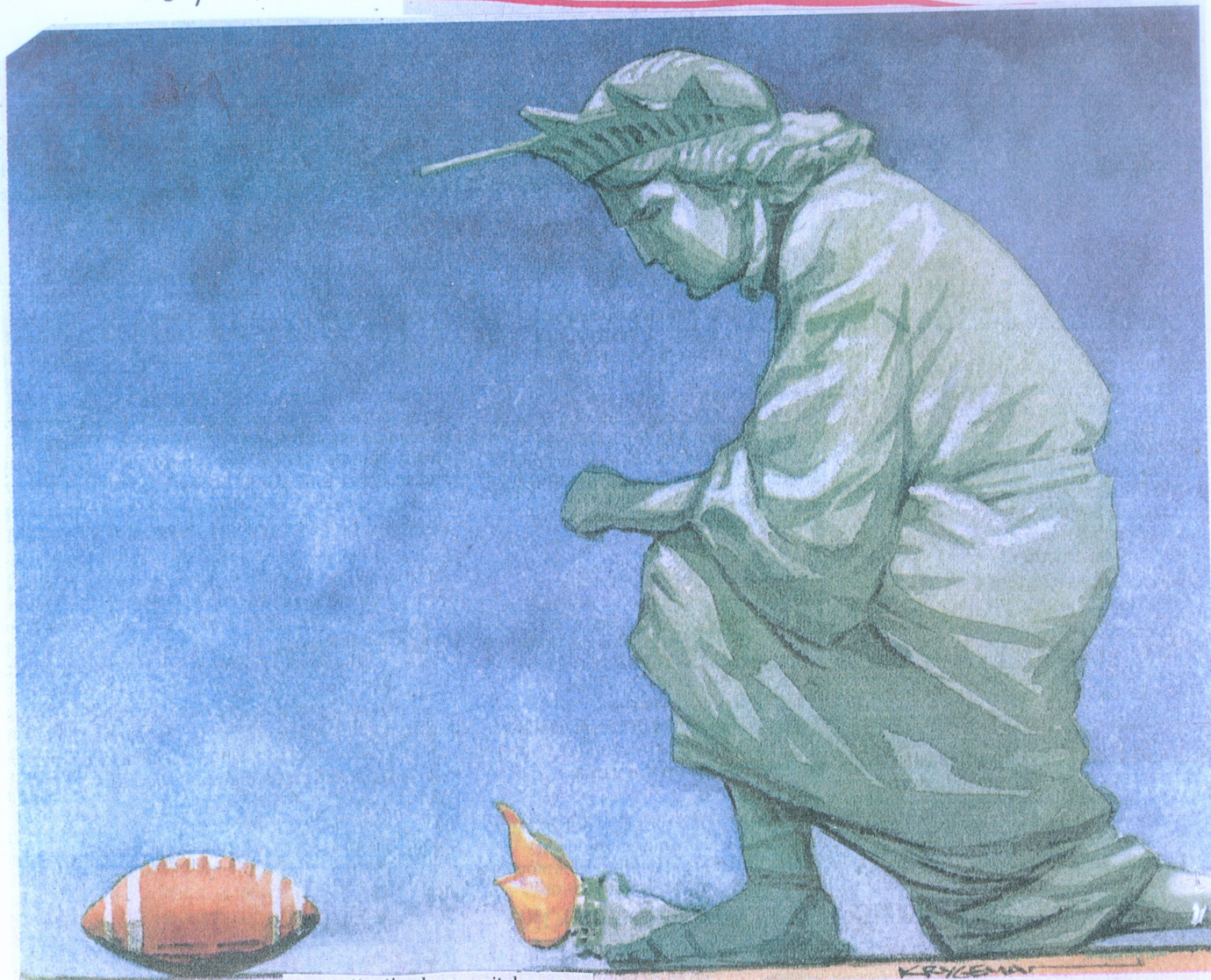
POLITICS OF IDENTITY IS BRINGING

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AMERICA TO ITS KNEES



NFL players, like Trump, don't have a leg to stand on

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There is nothing more tragic, foolish, futile, unnecessary and destructive right now in American public life than the dispute between the National Football League and President Donald Trump. It is worth our paying

some attention because it demonstrates exactly where identity politics must lead. It is where we are headed ourselves if we continue the trend of allowing the divisive insanity of identity politics increasingly to dominate our political culture.

The iconic image of the dispute is of powerful black athletes in the NFL kneeling while the US national anthem is played before matches. The players kneel not to show respect but the opposite. They refuse to stand to honour the anthem because they believe America is so irredeemably racist and rotten.

It is of course a minor irony that these players are paid millions upon millions of dollars and certainly suffer no disadvantage themselves. The protests were begun last year, before Trump became President, by a player named Colin Kaepernick. He didn't like racism generally, black economic disadvantage and police brutality to blacks.

From the start this was a classic identity politics protest in three ways. First, its grievances and demands were diffuse, non-specific and impossible to satisfy. Therefore, anyone not involved in the protest, even if they had exemplary life records of inclusion and anti-racist activism themselves, was ruled morally delinquent if they did not endorse the protest.

Second, it made the protest against the national anthem, which has always been a symbol of unity in America. It is an anthem that American soldiers — black,

Hispanic, Asian, white and every mixture imaginable — have stood to attention to and have played at the funerals of fallen soldiers. It calls the nation together. And for many Americans it is sacred. Therefore, in protesting injustice, some of it undoubtedly real, some of it plainly imagined or exaggerated, the protest gratuitously insults countless people of goodwill.

And third, it condemns America as inherently corrupt, immoral and unworthy.

Kaepernick's political maturity, or perhaps his deep political agenda, was evident when he gave a press conference explaining his actions while wearing a T-shirt showing Malcolm X meeting Cuba's late dictator, Fidel Castro.

As several commentators pointed out, Castro didn't only kill gays and poets, Catholics and dissidents. His Cuba always embodied a great deal of overt anti-black racism.

But Castro hated the US, so he is the ally of anti-American identity politics.

The mainstream media loves this stuff and "taking the knee", which earned players a lot of attention and hero status in some subcultures, started to spread. NFL owners didn't like it. The fans hated it.

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by Greg Sheridan

Continued

The issue exploded when Trump saw his opportunity. Out of the blue he riled up a big Alabama rally by demanding that those "sons of bitches" who disrespected the anthem and the flag be immediately sacked by NFL club owners.

Trump's comments were a disgrace — polarising, opportunistic and profoundly un-presidential.

He transformed the issue from one of foolish political disrespect from overpaid sports stars to freedom of speech. He injected immense emotional intensity in a way that only a president can do. It was at the very least profoundly, grievously irresponsible.

At first it seemed that Trump had miscalculated. Many NFL owners, including those who had supported Trump, stood in solidarity with their players against Trump's abuse. A few, not many, took the knee themselves. Others locked arms in solidarity with their players. In one poignant episode only one team player — a military veteran — determinedly stood for the anthem.

And of course the media went crazy condemning Trump, much of which condemnation was deserved.

But it is by no means clear that in terms of crude politics Trump is the loser here. When the players and the management refuse to stand for the anthem, they are roundly booed by the crowds.

Disapproval across the whole community of the Black Lives Matter campaign, which alleges systematic racism by police forces throughout America, has risen in the past few months from 20 per

cent to 60 per cent. This is an utterly terrible dynamic to take hold in America.

The real winners are the leaders of liberal identity politics — big cheeses now and newly minted moral heroes — on the one hand, and Trump and his gaggle on the other. The real losers are Americans, especially underprivileged folks, black, white, brindle or any other colour.

The thrust of liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries was to eradicate distinctions based on race. The whole purpose of identity politics is to entrench, to regard as determinative, distinctions based on race and other identity categories such as sexual orientation, gender and so on.

And if you've got several identities through which you can claim victim status then you hit the jackpot of intersectionality.

A key dynamic in identity politics is transforming Western societies from guilt cultures to shame cultures. Guilt is the sound, true remorse and anguish we experience when we know we have done something wrong. Guilt issues in an individual determination not to do it again.

Shame has about it the air of a public festival. It is about deviating from the norm, offending group-think. The process of public shaming, which is absolutely central to identity politics, creates a storm of public abuse for someone who holds a sentiment of which we can disapprove.

Many thinkers on the left of American politics have recognised how utterly destructive identity politics is, though they are having little effect on the politics of their tribe. One of the best essays on this is from Anis Shivani earlier this month in Salon.

He begins with a lament that a generation of young people has now gone through university and been schooled to think there is no other way of conceiving of politics except through identity, whereas the liberalism Shivani and his cohort imbibed stressed universalism and the power of the intellect, will and human agency to transcend accidents of birth and the like.

I don't agree with Shivani's politics but let me share just two of his insights on identity politics. First, liberal identity politics begets white identity politics.

He writes: "Liberal identity politics is in fact the father, or Great Mother, of white nationalism ... Liberals have been on a relentless mission to transform people's souls — to rid them of impure ideas about race and sexuality ... When (far-right leader) Richard Spencer discusses race as destiny he is no different than liberals who have been articulating every aspect of identity, split into narrower and narrower niches, in precisely the same terms."

In voting terms, left-wing identity politics has driven the white working class into the ugly arms of Trump.

Shivani's second profound point is that the demands of identity politics are irrational, and never-ending: "The more a particular group becomes validated in the broader culture's eyes, the less it feels satisfied with the recognition, and the more it feels the need of that rush of acknowledgment and credit based on identity alone. There is no end to it."

No end to it. And it's all miserable. Decent people should oppose it root and branch.