

BEHIND THE SHIELD
THE POWER & POLITICS OF THE NFL

[TRANSCRIPT]

INTRODUCTION

NEWS CLIP: And we begin tonight with the unescapable, head-on collision of politics and sports.

SPORTS FAN: I pay my money to watch them play football. I don't come out to watch a political rally.

SEN. MARCO RUBIO: We wish there was a place we could go to get away from politics. And for a lot of people that's Sunday afternoons during the fall.

DAVE ZIRIN: Over the past few years, the National Football League has become a political and cultural battleground attacked by fans, commentators, and political leaders at the highest levels for allowing itself to be politicized by rebel athletes and media members.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- The left demonstrates, the media spins, the NFL retreats, and great American football takes a hit.

-- Americans don't want politics shoved down their throat in football. They want beer and wings shoved down their throat.

-- Not everything needs to be politicized. What you do in that moment is sacred and fun, and it's supposed to bring the family together.

-- Yeah, just shut up and play ball!

RUSH LIMBAUGH: The left has hijacked this game.

DAVE ZIRIN: But what's gotten a lot less attention is all the ways that NFL football has been politicized on *behalf* of the power establishment all along, how for decades it's been pumping out messages that are impossible to separate from politics – whether people want to see them as political or not.

MILITARY AIR CONTROL TOWER: Five seconds, now!

DAVE ZIRIN: The fact is, the National Football League, more than any other major American sport, has explicitly built its brand on a whole complex of images and messages that have helped shape everything from dominant ideas about patriotism, militarism, and war ... to gender norms and our conception of American manhood ... to the politics of race and the history of racism and segregation in America ... to the meaning and place of money and corporate power in U.S. society. And I'd argue that *this* side of the political equation matters every bit as much as the images of political resistance and anti-racism that's coming from rebel athletes, and that usually dominates the discussions of politics and sports. And that whether we're football fans or not, or even sports fans, we all have a stake in understanding just how powerful the NFL has become as a cultural and political force in this country.

[TITLE SCREEN]

DAVE ZIRIN: I'm Dave Zirin, sports editor at *The Nation* magazine. And I've been a sports fan since I was a kid. I grew up in New York City just an absolute sports freak. I followed all those great New York teams in the '80s, and my room was a shrine to folks like Darryl Strawberry, Keith Hernandez, and, of course, Lawrence Taylor, the great Number 56. During that time, I never really thought much about politics, and I definitely didn't think about the impact of sports on the wider culture. But that really changed for me when I was a college student in Minnesota in 1996 and saw this amazing story.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Now to the politics of sports, where basketball fans in Chicago have some very strong feelings about protest, patriotism, and prayer.

-- Abdul-Rauf has been suspended.

DAVE ZIRIN: Twenty years before Colin Kaepernick took that fateful knee, there was a basketball player for the Denver Nuggets named Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who made the decision to not go out for the national anthem before games because he said he felt like it violated his religious and political principles. And I remember seeing one of the talking heads say, "Rauf must see himself as one of those athlete-activists."

And I'll never forget watching that and thinking to myself, "Athlete-activist? What the hell is that?" So, I went to the library. I started checking out a lot of old articles. I started digging in the crates, reading old biographies. And I found a book called *Second Wind* by Celtic great Bill Russell, a book about his own fight to be more than an athlete.

And then I dug deep into the history of Muhammad Ali ...

BOXING ANNOUNCER: A left to the face! A left and a right! Williams down! He may not get up!

DAVE ZIRIN: ... and realized that far from just being the greatest boxer of all time, and a remarkable showman, he was also an intensely political thinker who showed unbelievable guts in taking on the power establishment of his time.

NEWS CLIP: Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Muhammad Ali has just refused to be inducted into the United States Armed Forces.

MUHAMMAD ALI: I've said it once and I will say it again. The real enemies of my people are right here, not in Vietnam.

DAVE ZIRIN: All of this opened up this hidden history that the corporate sports media was not interested in telling. And I started to think to myself, "Does the sports world still have an impact on how we think about the way power operates?"

JACKIE ROBINSON: We think about the little kids being tossed from one side of the street to the other by the tremendous force of this hose. And we think about, this picture just sickens me, this big, brave policeman down here with his knee on the throat of this lady. And I think the conscience of America is beginning to awaken.

NEWS CLIP: Billie Jean King, world tennis champion and leader of a special brand of female revolutionaries.

BILLIE JEAN KING: I love tennis very much. I wanted it to change ever since I started in the sport. I thought it was just for the rich, and just for the white, and I want to change the sport.

DAVE ZIRIN: And when I started to think about the impact of sports on the wider culture, I quickly began to realize that much more than just being a site of resistance to the political order, sports can also work to *reinforce* the dominant status quo in really powerful ways of which we're often not even aware.

STADIUM ANNOUNCER: And welcome to Citi Field ...

DAVE ZIRIN: I mean, I like the escapism of sports as much as the next person, but it's kind of hard to be at a Mets game at Citi Field, a ballpark named after a bank that was paid for with more than half a billion dollars in taxpayer money, and not think to yourself, "Yeah, I think maybe there's some politics at work here that we should talk about."

NHL PUBLIC ADDRESS ANNOUNCER: And welcome members of the U.S. Army Sapper Leader Course.

DAVE ZIRIN: Also, it's a little hard to go to a game and see all the patriotic and military displays that have been such a huge part of American sports since 9/11 and not wonder if these games are being used to promote a certain political and ideological vision.

The fact is it's not sports and politics which aren't allowed to mix, as we're so often told. It's only sports and a certain *kind* of politics. One set of political ideas is fortified by the sports world, and another is marginalized.

And of course, there's no sport in America where these two currents have more of an impact on our country than NFL football.

“FOOTBALL IS AMERICA”

JOHN FACENDA (NFL FILMS): And as they say in Tinsel Town, roll ‘em!

NFL FILMS: So, they call it pro football! And thousands come to watch. To cheer. And millions more sit at home before TV sets pursuing the elusive magic of the Golden Game.

DAVE ZIRIN: Over the past few decades, the National Football League has emerged as the closest thing we have to a national language ...

HOWARD COSELL: What's been your view of this American professional football scene?

JOHN LENNON: It's an amazing event and sight. It makes rock concerts look like tea parties.

DAVE ZIRIN: ... or even a national religion.

NFL FILMS: Sunday's cathedrals ... during the 1970s, more than 100 million weekend worshipers turned out to hear their favorite gridiron gospel.

NFL FILMS: Our father. Art Rooney in Heaven. Heinz Field be Thy name.

DAVE ZIRIN: And over the years, the NFL has only gotten bigger.

NFL FILMS: It's almost a religious experience.

DAVE ZIRIN: Now, a lot of this is because football is pretty much the perfect sport for television – a beautifully produced, highly commodified distillation of art, science, speed, and violence that, for a typical fan, is sports at its most riveting and most elemental.

NFL COMMERCIAL: Now you can stream NFL ...

DAVE ZIRIN: And as we've moved headlong into the digital age, the television audience for pro football has actually grown – even as our cultural environment has splintered, and there are thousands of other offerings vying for our attention.

JIM NANTZ: Hello, friends. Jim Nantz, Tony Romo, Tracy Wolfson ...

DAVE ZIRIN: In fact, the NFL now has a bigger television audience than it did a generation ago, an amazing accomplishment that runs counter to pretty much everything else we see in the entertainment buffet that is our society.

SHAKIRA (singing): Whenever, wherever, we're meant to be together. I'll be there, and you'll be near ...

DAVE ZIRIN: Every year, the Super Bowl is the most watched show on TV with over 100 million viewers.

SNOOP DOGG: You ain't up on things ...

DR. DRE: Dr. Dre is the name I'm ahead of my game ...

DAVE ZIRIN: Of the top 20 shows in TV history, 19 of them have been Super Bowls.

DR. DRE: ... still rock them khakis with a cuff and a crease ...

DAVE ZIRIN: And NFL football dominates any number of other primetime and daytime ratings slots.

NEWS CLIP: The Top 15 most watched shows in September? All of them were NFL games.

DAVE ZIRIN: We are truly talking about a multibillion-dollar corporate leviathan. And as with all iconic corporate brands, this has made the NFL not only a titanic financial force that stands at the top of the sports food chain, but also an incredibly powerful *cultural* force. Like Disney or Coca-Cola, the NFL has built an incredibly powerful *brand* identity by selling a very distinct set of cultural ideas and values that people identify with and find meaning in.

And with the NFL, what they're selling more than anything else is a vision of America, and Americana.

NFL COMMERCIAL (singing): Man, oh man, you're my best friend, I scream it to the nothingness. There ain't nothing that I need ...

DAVE ZIRIN: NFL teams not only have a huge impact on the local economy, but also a tremendous effect on people's civic pride.

NFL COMMERCIAL: There's no place like home.

DAVE ZIRIN: And so, on an emotional level, NFL teams have become brands for their entire communities and cities.

NFL PROMOTION: Whether they win or lose, we're Lions die-hard fans. That's my team!

DAVE ZIRIN: Then at the same time, the NFL brand, maybe more than any other brand in the country, has become synonymous with a sense of *national* pride. This is the sport of the USA. Basketball is a global sport. Hockey is a Canadian and East European sport. Baseball is very much a geriatric sport in terms of U.S. fandom and more and more a Latin American sport with every passing year. But football is American to the core, at least in terms of promoting a certain vision of America.

The NFL itself has been very open about this. In its own guidelines for communicating the NFL brand, they talk explicitly about the deeply American meaning of their iconic logo, "The Shield." They call The Shield one of their greatest assets, as well as an enduring symbol because of the values it represents. And they proclaim that there are few sports identities that have been so deeply woven into the fabric of American culture.

NFL PROMOTION:

-- Football is America.

-- Football is America. It makes America great.

-- Football inspires us to believe.

-- Football is America.

DAVE ZIRIN: So, given that the NFL itself admits that it's more than just a game and has a powerful influence on the culture, I'd argue that it's every American's job to take a close look at the values and ideas the NFL promotes ... and to ask whether The Shield and everything it's come to represent have done more to reveal what's best, or to obscure what's worst, about this country.

"REAL MEN"

NFL FILMS: This is the face of the tiger.

DAVE ZIRIN: Over the years, there's been no bigger stage for modeling traditional ideas about American manhood than football.

NFL FILMS: And this, the action of a tiger.

DAVE ZIRIN: The NFL has long projected itself, from its beginnings, as the ultimate proving ground, an arena of conquest that equates being a real man with being physically tough, at ease with violence, and impervious to pain.

NFL FILMS:

-- Their abilities are not measured by touchdowns, but the facility of absorbing punishment and dishing it out.

-- The shattering impact of a block. The mountainous size of an onrushing defender. The splintering force of a forearm shiver. One ton of muscle with a one-track mind.

-- It comes down to destroying the man in front of you. This is where it's really at in pro football.

DAVE ZIRIN: In the grand narratives of NFL football, the sheer brutality of the game has the power to make men or to break them.

NFL FILMS: While some learned instinct and reaction, still others learned to be men. And every time they knocked you down, you got back up again.

STEVE SABOL: What do you think a player learns from playing pro football, from his experience in the game?

ALVIN ROY: He learns the same thing that a man learned in World War II. He learns how to take it. The men of the National Football League are real men. They know what it is to play hurt. They know what it is to play bleeding.

DAVE ZIRIN: And the notion of using football as a tool for hardening men has its roots in the origins of the game. It's hard for us to envision this now because football today draws most of its players from poor and working-class socioeconomic backgrounds, and is 70% Black. But American football started in the 19th century as a sport for privileged elites on Ivy League campuses as a way to harden a new generation of young white men who were coming to be seen as too soft and bookish to lead Americans onto the world stage and extend the country's imperial ambitions.

SONG: Masculine women, feminine men. Which is the rooster? Which is the hen? It's hard to tell them apart today, and say ...

DAVE ZIRIN: The end of the Civil War, the rise of the modern industrial society, and the growing push for women's equality had unleashed widespread fears that traditional manhood, male authority, and masculine toughness were all under siege by the forces of feminization. And this produced a full-blown crisis in masculinity and a kind of backlash fascination with making white men – and America itself – hard again.

And you see the new game of American football being embraced and promoted by prominent leaders not only as a sport, but as a substitute for war and a tool for toughening up the new generation.

I mean, you look at the writings and speeches of Walter Camp, who's known as the father of American football, and you see this preoccupation with the state of American manhood all over the place. He writes things like, "Fear and timidity have no place in the boy's mental makeup." And Camp argues that football, quote, was "doing for college-bred men what the experience of war did for so many of their predecessors."

In fact, during football's early years, the games were so violent that dozens of young men died on the field of play. *Died*. And when newspapers started to report the shocking casualty counts, Camp shot back at critics of the game's lethal violence by proclaiming it was, quote, "Better to make a boy an outdoor savage than an indoor weakling."

And Walter Camp wasn't alone. President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the earliest and most prominent promoters of the sport, also saw football as a way to cure the growing plague of effeminacy that he believed was infecting young men – at one point blasting critics of the game for wanting to, quote unquote, "emasculate football," and writing to a friend that he was okay with minimizing the danger of the game so long as it wasn't played, quote, on "too ladylike a basis."

So, what we see from the start is this huge psychic and emotional investment in football as a tool for social engineering, a vehicle for hardening men, all set against the backdrop of a festering crisis in masculinity and deep fears about the country going soft. Well, fast forward to our own time, and it's amazing how little has changed.

TUCKER CARLSON:

-- Boisterous masculinity is systematically suppressed to make way for a timid caretaker class.

-- Men feel that they can't be men.

JESSE WATERS: I just think people are soft in this country.

FOX NEWS COMMENTATOR: How are we breeding the next generation of leaders when everyone is so soft and weak?

ERIC BOLLING: We are wimping down. We're wussifying American men.

REP. MADISON CAWTHORN: Our culture today is trying to completely de-masculate all of the young men.

SEN. JOSH HAWLEY: The deconstruction of America begins with and depends on the deconstruction of American men.

DAVE ZIRIN: Over the past few years, we've once again heard a rising chorus of voices decrying the so-called wussification of America.

LAURA INGRAHAM: Men who are heterosexual, strong, aggressive competitors are no longer an acceptable part of society. Not really. They're the problem.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: You go to college campuses now and you'll find classes on how to take masculinity out of men.

DAVE ZIRIN: And as in the 19th century, we've seen these fears play out on the stage of football.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: What does the NFL stand for? Masculinity, strength, toughness. I don't want it to be taken over by a bunch of wusses.

DONALD TRUMP: What used to be considered a great tackle – a violent, head-on-head violent ... Now they tackle. “Head on head collision!” Bing! Flag! Football's become soft like our country has become soft. It's true.

DAVE ZIRIN: But while these defenders of the old masculine order have been wistfully pining away for the manly men of days gone by, they've forgotten to mention one crucial fact: that the impervious image of manhood that the NFL has been promoting for decades is a complete and total lie.

NFL FILMS: Get ready. Ready to be hit. Crushed. Squeezed. And mashed into curious shapes.

DAVE ZIRIN: The National Football League has been great at glamorizing the hard hits ...

NFL FILMS: As the players became bigger, stronger, and faster, the game became increasingly hazardous and therefore even more exciting for player and spectator alike.

DAVE ZIRIN: ... the seemingly superhuman toughness of the quote-unquote “real men” who play the game. But they've left out the physical costs.

BOOMER ESIASON: When I would hand the ball off and I would watch a guy go into the pile, what you hear and what you see ... you wonder how guys are coming out of that. It sounds like a car accident.

DAVE ZIRIN: Not just the soreness on Monday, but also the careers cut short and the lifetime of crippling injuries.

NEWS CLIP: The physical and mental toll of the nation's most-watched sport is being highlighted by the surprise retirement of the NFL's Andrew Luck. In seven years in the league, the former first-round draft choice has had a lacerated kidney, injured ribs, at least one concussion ...

ANDREW LUCK: For the last four years or so, I've been in this cycle of injury, pain, rehab. And it's been unceasing. It's taken my joy of this game away.

DAVE ZIRIN: The league doesn't want us to think too much about what the players union once said: that the NFL's the only profession with a 100% injury rate. Or what a former player once told me: that to play NFL football is to skip middle age. You go straight from being young to being old.

WESLEY WALKER: I have this atrophy. I'm starting to look like a skeleton, just this right hand alone. But I have this throughout my body.

DAVE ZIRIN: Or the fact that the average player's career lasts only three and a half years.

BRAD LEGGETT: For the rest of our lives we're going to be dealing with some of this stuff. The injuries don't go away.

RAY LUCAS: The pain doesn't either. I don't know how many surgeries I've had since passed. Four knee surgeries. You know, fused neck. Then another surgery. Then another surgery.

GREG GAINES: Takes me forever to get dressed. Takes me forever to do simple things like put your shoes on. I've had issues with pain medication. I think that's a problem that a bunch of ex-players have. I'm not sure it's talked about as much as it should be.

DAVE ZIRIN: The fact is the NFL has systematically tried to keep all of these realities out of view.

NEWS ANCHOR: Some of the nation's toughest athletes, pro football players, now retired, are suing and claiming a secret world of deception by the league, where powerful painkillers were handed out like candy.

DAVE ZIRIN: We now know the league spent decades pushing drugs on NFL players to mask their pain, causing irreparable damage to their bodies and brains. But that's not the mythology embodied by The Shield.

The NFL has built its brand on being the ultimate blue-collar working man's game. But despite the nice stories they tell to burnish their brand's appeal with working people, their values are corporate through and through, and all about the bottom line. As Tex Schramm, an original president and general manager of the Dallas Cowboys, said famously during the 1987 players'

strike, “The players are cattle and owners are ranchers, and owners can always get more cattle.”

JEREMY NEWBERRY: It's almost like a cattle call where you have 20 to 25 guys standing with your pants half down, waiting in line for a doctor, who's just got 100 different syringes lined up, and you're walking through, you know, they're sticking you one at a time as you walk in and out.

STEVEN SILVERMAN: Our players were shot up like cattle, they were brought to market, and then discarded like pieces of meat.

DAVE ZIRIN: And, most egregiously, they don't want us to think about the devastating brain injuries that NFL players have been suffering for decades – what is known as CTE.

DR. ANN MCKEE: CTE is increasingly recognized as a potential risk for athletes participating in contact sports such as American football.

NFL GAME –

-- JIM NANTZ: To Adams! Oh, he got popped in the face! Mouthguard comes out, and they're asking for help right away.

-- TONY ROMO: Jim, oh no.

DR. ANN MCKEE: CTE gradually interferes with normal brain functioning and may lead to changes in behaviors such as impulsivity, explosivity, and violence, changes in mood such as depression and hopelessness, and cognitive changes such as memory loss and cognitive decline.

NEWS CLIP:

-- REPORTER: He was exceptional, a four-time Pro Bowl safety. Number 22. A two-time Super Bowl champ. Teammates say Dave Duerson was also exceptionally smart and kind, which is why they were shocked when last week the 50-year-old killed himself with a gunshot to the chest. He sent a text message to his ex-wife hours before.

-- ALICIA DUERSON: He told me he loved me very much, and he was truly sorry, and that he loved the kids, and that he felt there was something wrong with his brain on the left side. And for me to please get it to the NFL.

FOOTBALL HELMET COMMERCIAL: The next level in helmet design ...

DAVE ZIRIN: There is no helmet that will protect a player from this. Any more than there is a special cigarette, no matter how big the filter, that won't give you cancer. And speaking of

cigarettes, we now know that NFL executives, like the tobacco industry before them, were saying for years that the science was inconclusive while hiding their own secret studies that said otherwise.

NEWS CLIPS --

-- REPORTER: NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell wouldn't acknowledge a link between violent hits and brain disease.

-- REP. JOHN CONYERS: I just asked you a simple question. What's the answer?

-- ROGER GODDELL: The answer is the medical experts would know better than I would with respect to that. But we are not treating that in any way in delaying anything that we do.

-- REPORTER: The study's author also testified the findings don't prove a link between playing football and mental problems later in life.

-- DAVID WEIR: Those numbers may or may not indicate an elevated risk from a career playing football. We can't draw a conclusion.

-- REPORTER: 110 of 111 former NFL players who had died and donated their brains had CTE.

DAVID ZIRIN: The bottom line is that the NFL has been more concerned with managing the damage to their brand than the damage to their players' brains, and bodies ...

ROGER GOODELL: I'm Roger Goodell.

DAVE ZIRIN: ... something that came across in highly ironic and insulting fashion when NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who was well aware at the time that his sport has been conclusively linked to ALS, took the Ice Bucket Challenge to show the compassion and empathy at the heart of the NFL family.

Meanwhile, in an indication of just how closely people have come to identify the NFL with American manhood itself, even the most minimal and inadequate reforms designed to improve safety have been interpreted as a sign that American men – and America itself – are under attack from the forces of feminization, and that the NFL of old is being ruined.

PETE HEGSETH: As a fan myself, I watch football because I want to see really tough dudes go to war with each other on the gridiron. Yet now I'm told that one collision is – you can't hit anybody anymore. How much of it also is the fact the NFL is getting pretty soft?

ANDREA TANTANOS: It's a more feminized, softer NFL. Why don't they just put away the pigskin, Greg? Bring out the Nerf ball. Play in a bouncy castle. Or something, you know, less violent.

TOM SHILLUE: Something tells me, Gavin, that you think football you should let them hit each other.

GAVIN MCINNIS: Of course, you should. It's the American way. Oh concussion. "Shmonshmussion," they oughta call it. Yes, you get punched in the noggin. Sure. That's life!

DONALD TRUMP: We don't go by these new and very much softer NFL rules. Concussion! Oop! Oop! Got a little ding on the head! No, no! You can't play for the rest of the season! Our people are tough!

NFL GAME:

-- Big hit! Penalty marker on the play.

-- They're going to say he hit a defenseless receiver.

DAVE ZIRIN: Guys like Donald Trump don't want us to think about the fact that these reforms were pushed by players themselves.

NEWS CLIP: The NFL is attempting to make the game safer, implementing new concussion rules. Players say they have been fighting for this for a very long time. Some say it's too little, too late.

DAVE ZIRIN: People like them have so much more to gain professionally and politically by standing up for so-called "real men" than the actual men who play the game, and by creating the illusion that these reforms are a symptom of a country gone soft because of feminists and social justice warriors.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: The social justice warriors are coming in here trying to legislate the game based on their own personal political preferences. Because the NFL has direct roots to masculinity. It is all man. It is a man's game. And that's what all the focus on the *meanness* is. And the injuries.

DAVE ZIRIN: These ideological distortions and attempts to politicize and weaponize football to score points in the culture wars don't just show contempt for the actual men who play the game. They also show contempt for *other* victims of the NFL's culture of violent masculinity.

NEWS CLIP: We have reported so often on bullying in America. But we never expected that some of the toughest men in the country would say it is happening to them.

DAVE ZIRIN: The locker room is supposed to be a professional work environment. And it's a union workplace. But you still have people like Richie Incognito, who viciously bullied a fellow player, Jonathan Martin.

NEWS CLIP: According to the report, Martin says he was driven into depression, and believed his failure to stand up to his teammates was a personal shortcoming.

DAVE ZIRIN: Richie Incognito's defense was that he was trying to make Jonathan Martin tough enough to play in the NFL.

NEWS CLIP: The Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel reports Dolphins coaches asked Incognito to toughen up Martin.

DAVE ZIRIN: And so, this kind of behavior becomes valorized.

RICHIE INCOGNITO: Who wants a [expletive deleted] piece?!

DAVE ZIRIN: It becomes the sort of thing where everything is justified, no matter how disgusting, because it allows you to become the kind of person, the kind of "real man," who can play in the NFL.

NEWS CLIP:

-- REPORTER: Kind of the argument being made here about Jonathan Martin that, you know, we're going to rough you up, we've got to toughen you up first. And that's just the way we roll.

-- RANDY CROSS: Well, weak and soft have never survived in an NFL locker room. Period.

DAVE ZIRIN: And, of course, the league's mostly gutless handling of bullying in the locker room is 100% connected to its mostly gutless response to homophobia.

NEWS CLIP: It's the most homophobic place in the world. If you've never been in it, trust me.

DAVE ZIRIN: Then, at the same time, there are all the ways this seeming obsession with denigrating anything even remotely "feminine" in men has extended to a culture of rampant sexism and the denigration of women.

NEWS CLIP: A *New York Times* report last month found that several cheerleaders alleged they were ordered to act as dates for sponsors and suite holders during a calendar photoshoot. And that they were told to pose topless in front of those guests, even though there was no nudity in the calendar.

MELANIE COBURN: It's devastating. These women have been texting me for the last 36 hours wondering if their nude bodies or photographs are circulating through the inboxes of the NFL. It's just indicative of the toxic culture that existed within the Washington Football Team and around the league.

DAVE ZIRIN: And it's not just cheerleaders.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- There's breaking news just coming in about Washington's NFL team. Fifteen former female employees are speaking to *The Washington Post* detailing allegations of sexual harassment over a span of 13 years.

-- Emily Applegate, who worked in the marketing department, said, quote, "It was the most miserable experience of my life."

EMILY APPLGATE: These people are not going to believe or care about some young woman that's making \$32,000 a year when they have somebody that's the CMO of a company that they have to protect.

DAVE ZIRIN: And there's really no way to separate the attitude towards women that's on display here from the league's handling of domestic violence.

NEWS CLIP: It is a culture that clearly puts up with domestic violence.

DAVE ZIRIN: The NFL has been forced to act in recent years only when there is immense public pressure and it becomes impossible to deny and ignore, as in the case of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice.

NEWS CLIP: Disturbing new video tonight of an NFL football player knocking out his fiancée.

DAVE ZIRIN: The fact is, if that video doesn't go public, Roger Goodell would have done what he has always done before: Hide it behind The Shield.

NEWS CLIP: ESPN reporting the Ravens knew exactly what was on that brutal elevator tape for months, but they still pressed top NFL officials to go easy on their star player.

DAMIEN WOODY: It's just funny, like, what the league will tolerate and what they won't tolerate.

NEWS CLIP: Pro football fans were seeing pink yesterday. It's for Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

DAVE ZIRIN: Meanwhile, the NFL has spent more time, energy, and money targeting women with PR campaigns to keep them watching, rather than appealing to men to stop the abuse.

HANNAH STORM: So, here's a question. What does all of this mean for the future? What does it mean for female fans whose dollars are so coveted by the NFL? Who make up an estimated

45% of the NFL's fan base? Will the NFL, in all its power, take the lead on the issue of domestic violence?

DAVE ZIRIN: The point here isn't that the NFL is any worse than any other traditionally male cultural institution in America when it comes to things like domestic violence or sexual assault or bullying or homophobia. It's not that there's more domestic violence or incidents of sexual assault among NFL players than in the broader population. This is more about how this league, rather than using its cultural influence to *lead*, has failed time and again to take responsibility for their own role in perpetuating a culture of violent masculinity.

“THE AMERICAN WAR GAME”

GEORGE CARLIN: In football, the object is for the quarterback, otherwise known as “the field general,” to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy – in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use the shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack which punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line.

NFL FILMS: Hitting begins with hand-to-hand combat at the line of scrimmage. Their war is a lonely war that is submerged and fought in the trenches.

DAVE ZIRIN: The idea of football as a battlefield, and players as warriors, is built into the very language of the sport.

NFL FILMS:

-- Like guided missiles, players carried heavy payloads. And they used their bodies to launch retaliatory strikes with devastating effect.

-- Number 50 ... search and destroy!

NEWS CLIP:

-- Well, when he is not coaching the Cougs, you can find head football coach Mike Leach leading a lecture. For the last five weeks, Leach and former state senator Mike Baumgartner have been teaching a course called “Insurgent Warfare and Football Strategy.”

-- During the surge in Iraq, American military focused on constricting the insurgency space, said Baumgartner. Then coach Leach used Cougar football film to show how his air-raid offense gives opponents fewer options in space.

DAVE ZIRIN: And all of this has made the NFL the nation's premiere staging ground for displays of patriotism and militarism. From massive field-sized flags and flyovers to the NFL's Salute to Service campaigns and four-star generals doing the coin flip before the Super Bowl, NFL football games have become celebrations and spectacles of national pride and America's armed forces. So that on the biggest stage in sports, you have football, the flag, and the military ... routinely and seamlessly integrated, coming to embody the very ideal of American power and strength.

NFL FILMS:

-- NARRATOR: In a game known for its complex passing patterns and crossing routes, it only makes sense that a good flyover can give inspiration.

-- ROB LOWE: Anthem is ending. It's hitting that beautiful crescendo. Plane comes over. And that's America. If you're around the world and you're watching that, I think you go, "You know what? I get it. America is pretty cool."

DAVE ZIRIN: And it tells you everything you need to know about how deeply political and ideological these things are when you realize they only really start to become a common feature of the NFL during the Vietnam War.

During the '60s, you have all these different movements, the antiwar movement, the Black freedom struggle, challenging the old order. And it's precisely at this moment that the NFL starts to be weaponized.

SONG: Whenever they wave the stars and stripes above you ...

DAVE ZIRIN: Not from the left-wing radicals of the counterculture, but by those who saw in football a way to project the traditional patriotic values that were being questioned in the larger society.

SONG: Let's make America what it used to be!

VINCE LOMBARDI: Before anyone can embrace freedom, I think they must first embrace those things which underly freedom. And they are duty, and respect for authority, and a development of a mental discipline.

DAVE ZIRIN: No NFL figure embodied these traditional values more than Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, whose teams were dominant throughout the 1960s. Lombardi represented everything the left-wing counterculture allegedly seemed to lack: physical and mental toughness, discipline, respect for authority.

And in 1969, the Nixon administration would mobilize Lombardi and NFL football as political weapons. Two days after the Vietnam War Moratorium, one of the largest anti-Vietnam

protests to that point, a Nixon aide drafted a memo encouraging the president to attend football. Nixon agreed, becoming the first sitting president to attend an NFL game, which just so happened to be between the Dallas Cowboys and the Washington football team, which was now coached by Vince Lombardi.

NFL FILMS:

-- RICHARD NIXON: I think as we think of men like Vince Lombardi, we can think of what that should mean and can mean to America.

-- DWIGHT L. CHAPIN: It did set up a contrast. He wanted the country to know that football fans were different than those Moratorium people. The Redskins made a decision as to what they wanted to do for their halftime that involved all the branches of the armed forces.

DAVE ZIRIN: The message to the American people was clear. During a time of deep political divisions, the National Football League was on the side of Nixon, the flag, and the war.

In fact, Pete Rozelle, the NFL's commissioner, had already made the decision to use the league to tip the scales in a pro-war direction. Super Bowl II featured the first military flyover. And in 1969, Rozelle staged an elaborate patriotic halftime show called "America, Thanks."

NFL ANNOUNCER: Forming an eagle, the symbol of American pride and power ...

DAVE ZIRIN: And as American and Vietnamese casualties were piling up, and popular opposition to the Vietnam War was growing, Rozelle turned his attention to the national anthem. Before the 1970 Super Bowl between the Minnesota Vikings and the Kansas City Chiefs, Rozelle demanded that players stand upright and totally still during the anthem with helmets held under their arms. Rozelle went so far as to mandate that players prepare for the national anthem by doing drills during Super Bowl practices, appointing a member of his staff as, quote, "Vice President in Charge of the National Anthem."

Meanwhile, the NFL did its best to act like it reflected the freethinking spirit of the times.

NFL FILMS: During the 1960s, there was marching in the street and walking on the moon. Profound changes affected every aspect of American culture, and pro football was no different.

DAVE ZIRIN: But the rebel image the NFL tried to cultivate during this period was family friendly and limited to things like players growing their hair out.

NFL FILMS: From his unconventional white shoes to his mod-god hair, Namath stands alone in his flamboyance.

DAVE ZIRIN: Guys like Joe Namath were the epitome of rebels without a cause, completely devoid of any of the scary political content that was raging in the real world. Their rebellion only as long as their sideburns.

JOE NAMATH: In football, some players wanted some things changed. I mean, why would a guy not be able to wear a mustache or have long hair? Silly things, you know?

DAVE ZIRIN: And on the very rare occasions when NFL players *did* show the courage to stand up for what they believed in, they paid a heavy price.

DICK CAVETT: My next guest, one of pro football's most – *was* one of football's most – ferocious linebackers. And he's written a book, which is not out yet, but a lot of people are dreading its publication. Welcome, please ... Dave Meggyesy!

DAVE ZIRIN: Just look what happened to St. Louis Cardinals linebacker Dave Meggyesy, who in many ways was the Colin Kaepernick of his time. Meggyesy refused to come out for the anthem, and then walked away from the sport, writing a blistering book that exposed how the language and culture of the league were being used to sell the Vietnam War.

DAVE MEGGYESY: I think the whole *raison d'etre* of football is violence. It's institutional violence. A man by the name of Thomas Morgan wrote a piece in *Esquire* about three years ago called "The American War Game."

DAVE ZIRIN: And like Colin Kaepernick, paid for raising these issues with his job.

DAVE MEGGYESY: It really came down to in my last year, in 1969, when I was benched because of my anti-war activities.

DAVE ZIRIN: The message was clear: the only political messages allowed in NFL football are those that promote uncritical patriotism, blind obedience to political authority, and support for American militarism, something we've seen again and again in the years since, especially during times of war.

MILITARY AUDIO:

-- 4, 3, 2, 1 ...

-- Boom! There's a hit!

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH: Just two hours ago, allied air forces began an attack on military targets in Iraq and Kuwait.

DAVE ZIRIN: In 1991, ten days before the Super Bowl between the New York Giants and the Buffalo Bills, the United States launched a massive aerial assault against Saddam Hussein's

Iraqi forces in Kuwait and initiated the first Gulf War. It was the first major U.S. combat operation since the catastrophe in Vietnam. And while there didn't seem to be much enthusiasm for football, the NFL made the decision to play the game ...

NFL FILMS: In a stadium with the tightest security of any NFL game ever played, Super Bowl XXV began under the shadow of war in the Mideast.

DAVE ZIRIN: ... and proceeded to use it to push the pro-war index to new heights. The NFL gave out 72,000 American flags to fans to wave as they entered the stadium. And then there was this ...

BOY SINGING: Did you ever know that you were my hero ...

DAVE ZIRIN: The NFL turned to Disney to produce a patriotic halftime show cast almost entirely with children, intercutting all-American childhood innocence with images of troops going to war in the Gulf. And then brought the children of American military personnel onto the field. Before capping it all off with a child-friendly war message from President George H.W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States.

GEORGE H.W. BUSH: Good evening from the White House to everyone in the Sunshine State and around the world enjoying this wonderful game. Today, we should recognize the men and women in our armed forces. Far away from home, they protect freedom in the Persian Gulf and around the world.

BARBARA BUSH: On behalf of the whole Bush family, thank you for allowing us to be with you tonight.

GEORGE BUSH: And God bless you all. And God bless all freedom-loving people around the world.

DAVE ZIRIN: But the pre-game festivities stole the show, when Whitney Houston, dressed in red, white, and blue, delivered what's probably the most famous national anthem performance in sports history.

WHITNEY HOUSTON (singing): Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light ...

DAVE ZIRIN: As she sang, American military personnel held flags of U.S. allies in the war effort. And the American flag was everywhere.

WHITNEY HOUSTON (singing): ... the land of the free, and the home of the brave."

DAVE ZIRIN: Look, the issue is not that Whitney Houston sang a song in incredibly moving fashion – because she did. It's that it was in service of a war, and that the NFL was again revealed as the perfect syringe for the drug of militarism.

MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL OPENING: Retaliatory strike in Dallas!

DAVE ZIRIN: This mix of NFL football and the politics of militarism and nationalism have only become more seamless in the years since. So, as the 1990s go on, you saw things like Monday Night Football using these insanely militarized graphics in their opening without anybody feeling the need to explain why.

And then came 9/11.

The planes hit the buildings on Tuesday. Thousands of people were dead. And the NFL was still planning to go ahead with games the following Sunday with this incredible sense of its own self-importance.

VINNIE TESTAVERDE: I don't even understand why we're here today. I think all games should be canceled this week.

DAVE ZIRIN: It actually took a players' rebellion led by the New York Jets to say, "No, we need to take a week off of games."

KEVIN MAWAE: Some people in this locker room have neighbors who are missing. You know, our children's friends in school don't have dads and moms anymore.

DAVE ZIRIN: And so, there were no games the following Sunday. But when play resumed, that's when you started to see all these hypermilitarized, hyperpatriotic displays that used to be reserved just for the Super Bowl, now taking place in every game.

NFL FILMS --

-- ANNOUNCER: Commissioner Paul Tagliabue made sure each game had a patriotic feel.

-- PAUL TAGLIABUE: It was to show that as a nation, we were unified and resilient and determined and not cowed.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Super Bowl XXXVI.

DAVE ZIRIN: And then there was the Super Bowl itself that year. The U.S. had gone into Afghanistan a couple of months before, and the Bush administration was now ginning up its propaganda efforts to lead the U.S. to a war in Iraq under false pretenses.

GEORGE W. BUSH: The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade.

DAVE ZIRIN: And the Super Bowl would do nothing to get in the way. It was broadcast on Fox, and throughout Fox used military graphics to introduce players and statistics.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Here's the Ram offense, led by the man who Ron Pitts just talked to, Kurt Warner, two-time ...

DAVE ZIRIN: Then, as with Whitney Houston during the Gulf War, the rock group U2 delivered a musical performance that summoned up patriotism on the eve of war. ..

BONO: America!

DAVE ZIRIN: As they ran the names on a big screen of everyone who died in 9/11.

BONO (singing) Ahhhhhhhhhhh!

DAVE ZIRIN: From that point on, the militarism and nationalism that had been showing up in bursts in the past would become fully and seamlessly integrated into NFL football every single week.

NFL PROMOTION: This is a presentation of Fox Sports.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Presenting tonight's colors ...

DAVE ZIRIN: The NFL also developed a formal partnership with the Pentagon and the Armed Services to do events like Salute to Service.

NFL SALUTE TO SERVICE AD: On this Sunday, we take a moment to celebrate something bigger than the game we all love ... America.

DAVE ZIRIN: There's always been militarism in the NFL, especially coinciding with times of actual war. But it was only after 9/11 where you see a permanent state of militarism nest in the NFL. Which makes the case of Pat Tillman all the more remarkable.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Number 40, Pat Tillman!

DAVE ZIRIN: Back in 2001, Tillman was coming off the best year of his career. He was tough and loyal. A coach's dream. Then after 9/11, he shocked the world by joining the Army Rangers.

PAT TILLMAN: My great grandfather was at Pearl Harbor, and a lot of my family has gone and fought in wars. And I really haven't done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that.

DAVE ZIRIN: Then, tragedy struck.

NEWS CLIP: Pat Tillman, who gave up a multimillion-dollar contract in professional football, has been killed.

DAVE ZIRIN: The Army awarded him a Silver Star for his gallantry in action against an armed enemy. They said that Tillman charged up a hill to protect his men but was shot down by the Taliban. That was the *official* story. But there was only one problem. It was a lie.

NEWS CLIP: Accounts and evidence surfaced showing he was actually killed by friendly fire.

KEVIN TILLMAN: Pat and these other soldiers volunteered to put their lives on the line for this country. Anything less than the truth is a betrayal of those values that all soldiers who have fought for this nation have sought to uphold. A terrible tragedy that might have further undermined support for the war in Iraq was transformed into an inspirational message that served instead to support the nation's foreign policy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

DAVE ZIRIN: And maybe the worst part about all of this was that this whitewashing of Tillman's story also hid what might be the most important part of his story – that while he was in Iraq in 2003, he had turned against the war. He had started to read the antiwar author Noam Chomsky and decided that the invasion of Iraq was “illegal as hell.”

And the way the NFL responded to all of this tells you just about everything you need to know about its definition of patriotism and its loyalty to our nation's service members.

FOX NFL SUNDAY CLIP: Good morning, America, and welcome to a special edition of Fox NFL Sunday!

DAVE ZIRIN: Fox NFL Sunday commemorated Veterans Day just a few years later by broadcasting from the Pat Tillman USO Center at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan.

FOX NFL SUNDAY CLIP: The memory of Pat Tillman lives on – on this very airfield here at Bagram.

DAVE ZIRIN: And rather than bothering to mention that Tillman had turned *against* the war, the Fox commentators, dressed in full camouflage, used his life and death to *promote* war.

FOX NFL SUNDAY CLIPS:

-- The tie between the U.S. military and the NFL has always been a strong one.

-- The ties between professional football and the U.S. military grew immensely during World War II, and today that bond is stronger than ever.

DAVE ZIRIN: But the hijacking of Pat Tillman's memory hasn't stopped there. In the midst of the NFL player protests against police brutality and racial injustice, Tillman's wife blasted Donald Trump and others for exploiting her husband's service and sacrifice to score political points.

Now, a lot of those who knew Tillman best, and were moved by his courage in speaking out against the injustice of the war in Iraq, were convinced he would have been among the first to silently kneel alongside Kaepernick.

RORY FANNING: You know, I'd be shocked if Pat Tillman wasn't out there taking a knee with these players. Because Pat cared about people who were exploited. People who were oppressed. He didn't care so much about symbols.

DAVE ZIRIN: But that didn't stop Trump from retweeting an account that used Tillman's image – and service – to cast the protests as disrespectful to the troops and call for a *boycott* of the NFL.

Kaepernick himself had repeatedly gone out of his way to say he was protesting on *behalf* of the freedoms and ideals American service members have fought and died for, not against them.

COLIN KAEPERNICK: You know, I have great respect for men and women that have fought for this country. I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country. And they fight for freedom. They fight for the people. They fight for liberty and justice for *everyone*. And that's not happening.

DAVE ZIRIN: And in fact, the very idea of taking a knee had come from a former active-duty Green Beret and NFL player who told Kaepernick he sympathized with the issues he was trying to raise and suggested taking a knee instead of sitting.

NATE BOYER: I'm not a Black man in America, so I don't know what that feels like, and I never will. I suggested kneeling because you can often see an image of a war fighter taking a knee in front of a fallen brother's grave to pay respects.

DAVE ZIRIN: But none of these inconvenient details made their way into the National Football League's official statements on Kaepernick and the protests.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- The NFL commissioner breaking his silence on the national anthem protests.

-- Goodell told the Associated Press that he disagrees with Colin Kaepernick's choice.

-- Goodell said that he does not support disrespecting the flag.

DAVE ZIRIN: Instead, for four full years the league helped reinforce the one-dimensional view that the player protests were, by definition, disrespectful to the flag and the troops.

ROGER GOODELL: We encourage all our players to respect the flag. For us, we're all about patriotism.

DAVE ZIRIN: Watching the NFL machine wrap itself in the flag like this, it was easy to forget that the same league executives and owners who were lecturing Black players about loyalty to the troops had been busted just a year before by Congress for using patriotic and military displays to line their own pockets.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- An unprecedented congressional review has found those moments are often actually paid for by the Department of Defense.

-- We thought they were just honoring the servicemen.

-- You would think – except these billionaire NFL owners are, you know, getting a couple hundred thousand dollars for having a flag fly over their stadium. It's, it's really disgusting.

-- Senator Jeff Flake and his fellow Senator John McCain of Arizona call it “Paid Patriotism.”

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN: For many Americans, football is deeply patriotic and woven into the very fabric of our country's unique history and heritage. That's why I and so many other Americans were shocked and disappointed to learn that several NFL teams weren't sponsoring these activities out of the goodness of their own hearts but were doing so to make an extra buck. Many of the color-guard performances and troop recognition ceremonies were actually funded with American tax dollars and pocketed by wealthy NFL teams.

DAVE ZIRIN: But this didn't garner nearly as much outrage as Kaepernick taking a knee.

MARK LEVIN: So, I would tell this guy, “You stay seated, punk! Because the men and women who fought for that flag are so much more important and so better than you!”

MEGHAN MCCAIN: Have respect for this flag. Have respect for the men and women who have died for us to have these freedoms.

JEANINE PIRRO: You want to kneel, sit, or raise your fist during the national anthem – *anthem* – you ought to go kneel in front of a guy who's lost his limbs fighting for you!

DAVE ZIRIN: The reality was this was a protest to raise awareness about police violence and racial inequity. But they didn't care.

JEANINE PIRRO: And don't give me this crap that you guys want to support reform and stand up against social injustice. Shame on you! Shame on all of you!

DAVE ZIRIN: Suggesting that the reaction to NFL players protesting during the anthem might have as much to do with the politics of race as anything else.

YOUTUBE VIDEO: All right, Kaepernick. Maybe you can go play for the Nigerian Nickelbacks or something. I'm sure that they'll treat you very well over there.

TAILGATING NFL FAN 1: He's un-American and he doesn't deserve to be in our country.

TAILGATING NFL FAN 2: All white – all lives matter! That's what she meant to say!

TAILGATING NFL FAN 1: So that's where we stand. If you want to live in our country, you respect the flag. You respect our military. It's sad. He's really a sad, pathetic person.

“THOSE WHO OWN AND THOSE WHO PLAY”

NFL PROMOTION: Football is a microcosm of America ... all races, religions.

DAVE ZIRIN: For years, the NFL has branded itself as a model of racial diversity and equality, a level playing field in the best American sense.

DEACON JONES: This is the only place that I've seen where segregation didn't play a part. During the course of those three hours on a Sunday afternoon, I mean, I played with guys in Mississippi. I know fathers were probably members of the Klan. But on Sunday afternoon for three hours, their commitment was to their teammates.

DAVE ZIRIN: So, we get NFL-produced pieces about how talent should be all that matters, not the color of one's skin.

DAVE ROBINSON: Vince Lombardi, to his credit, said, “Listen, we don't draft by color here. We draft by football ability.” He said, “The only colors we got in Green Bay are green and gold.”

DAVE ZIRIN: These stories are *important* – and shouldn't be minimized. But they also shouldn't be allowed to conceal the darker history behind The Shield when it comes to race.

To its credit, when pro football started to establish itself in the 1920s, pro teams fielded a smattering of Black players, including the great Paul Robeson, and star quarterback Fritz

Pollard, who in 1920 led the Akron pros to the first championship game in NFL history and a year later was named the league's first Black coach.

Well, all of that changed in 1933, when NFL owners got together and made a gentlemen's agreement to ban Black players altogether -- an ugly but mostly unknown story that's impossible to separate from George Preston Marshall, the owner of the NFL franchise in Boston and one of the most notorious and outspoken racists in the history of the league.

In the years leading up to the 1933 ban, Marshall had openly refused to allow Black players to play on his team, and he reportedly pressured the rest of the league to do the same, finally succeeding in 1933. It would take 13 years and a World War for the league to finally start integrating and signing Black players again, beginning with Kenny Washington out of UCLA – who broke this color barrier in 1946, a year before his UCLA football teammate, a guy by the name of Jackie Robinson, would do the same in baseball.

NFL FILMS: Young Black men from small Negro colleges in the South and the West came to the game in a steady stream.

DAVE ZIRIN: And by 1952, every team but one had integrated. It was the team of George Preston Marshall, which he had renamed the Redskins.

NFL FILMS (song): Hail to the Redskins! Hail victory! Braves on the warpath! Fight for old D.C.!

DAVE ZIRIN: In the early days, when the team first moved to Washington, they were the southernmost franchise. And having an all-white team was part of marketing themselves to the Jim Crow South.

ERNIE ACCORSI: You know, the fight song, even, “Hail the Redskins,” said fight for Old Dixie; it didn't say for old D.C. That was changed later. So, they were playing to the South.

DAVE ZIRIN: And when the Kennedy administration started to apply pressure on the team to integrate, because it was embarrassing to have an all-white team in the nation's capital at the height of the Cold War, Marshall not only held firm, but doubled down.

It wasn't until Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, under the direction of President Kennedy, threatened to evict the team from their brand-new stadium, which just so happened to be on federal land, that Marshall finally relented and signed a Black player.

Now, it might be tempting to view stories like these as relics of the past, and to look at men like George Preston Marshall as outliers who were out of the mainstream. But that would ignore the fact that the NFL not only never censured Marshall for his racism but rewarded him by inducting him into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And it would ignore how Marshall's racist and segregationist legacy is alive and well today in the person of Dan Snyder, the current

owner of the Washington football team, who doubled down in the face of growing calls to change the team name.

NEWS CLIP: Snyder says, quote, “We’ll will never change the name. It’s that simple. Never. You can use caps.”

DAVE ZIRIN: For folks who don’t know what a “redskin” is, that’s what trappers and hunters were paid for as they would go out into Indian Country and come back with the scalps of Native Americans. Each scalp was called a “redskin.”

RAY HALBRITTER: It’s a dictionary-defined, offensive racial epithet. You shouldn’t be using that to sell a national sports team to America or to the rest of the world.

DAVE ZIRIN: But Snyder simply countered with unearned authority that the name was actually a mark of respect.

DAN SNYDER: Most people understand what the team name means. They look at it as we all do – as honor, respect.

DAVE ZIRIN: And all along, the NFL echoed the line that trading in cartoon stereotypes was a sign of deep and abiding respect for the rich cultural heritage of indigenous peoples.

ROGER GOODELL: This is the name of a football team. A football team that has had that name for 80 years and has presented the name in a way that has honored Native Americans.

DAVE ZIRIN: It’s a tried-and-true formula that American corporations like the NFL have been perfecting for years – appropriate the cultures of minority groups to keep your mostly white customer base happy and entertained; justify it by saying you’re honoring and celebrating diversity; and don’t think too much about whether you’re helping deflect attention away from persistent racial inequalities.

We’ve seen a similar pattern play out – in different ways – with the NFL’s enthusiastic, decades-long embrace of Black culture.

NFL FILMS: From the top, it looks executive and slick. But it’s more. The game has soul.

DAVE ZIRIN: During the social and cultural changes of the late 1960s and ‘70s, as more and more Black players arrived on the scene and made their mark on the league, the NFL’s messaging began to shift.

NFL FILMS: Professional football, the sport with the flash, dash, and thrills custom-made for the new America. The *now* America.

DAVE ZIRIN: Black culture was now ascendant in America. And the league's chief storyteller, the legendary NFL Films, started moving to its rhythms.

NFL FILMS: Thankfully, the '70s did bring a change of rhythm. "Sunday with Soul" had arrived.

DAVE ZIRIN: The same league that had been weaponized by Nixon and the right to push blind patriotism and bang the drums of war for America's invasion of Vietnam was now marching to the beat of Black culture and racial diversity and wrapping itself in an aura of Black cool.

NFL FILMS: And these bands symbolized the emergence of an increased African-American influence in the National Football League.

DAVE ZIRIN: It was an open-armed embrace of Black culture that has only intensified in the years since. Today, in a league now dominated by Black players, the amped-up patriotism and militarism are still as strong as ever. But so are images and messages aligning the league with Black entertainment culture, racial diversity, and the fight for racial justice.

This is a league that wants us to know that it gets it. It wants us to know that it's not only a shining example of racial diversity, but also on board with the fight against systemic racism.

ROGER GOODELL: It's in the Declaration of Independence, right? If you have the ability, it is your obligation to go and make change. And I think that's what our players feel, that's what our clubs feel, and I think that's what the NFL is doing.

SNOOP DOGG: C'mon, everybody put your hands in the air. Put your hands way up in the air!

DR. DRE: Now let me welcome everybody to the Wild Wild West ...

DAVE ZIRIN: But these images and messages of racial diversity and equality, like so many other things with the NFL, have also concealed a much darker reality. Just look at how power is actually distributed in the league today.

First of all, 70% of the players in the NFL are African American. But as we're having this conversation, there are no Black owners in the National Football League. Zero. This is the reason why NFL player Michael Bennett said that the NFL is actually segregated – not integrated. It's segregated between those who own and those who play.

And there's another piece to this.

NEWS CLIP: Why is a league with 70% of its players African American led by head coaches who've been predominantly white?

DAVE ZIRIN: Even though more than two-thirds of NFL players are Black, as of this discussion, more than 90% of head coaches in the NFL are white.

NEWS STORY: This morning, a bombshell lawsuit. Former Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores is suing the NFL and three teams claiming, quote, "In certain critical ways, the NFL is racially segregated and is managed much like a plantation."

ROD GRAVES: In 1919, Fritz Pollard was the first African-American head coach. One hundred years later, we've got three head coaches, maybe soon to be four or five, and one general manager. That is shameful, in my opinion. That is not much progress.

DAVE ZIRIN: This is what power and authority look like in the NFL. African-American men represent the overwhelming majority of the product and the labor. Yet the people who own and lead that labor are overwhelmingly white.

MICHAEL HOLLEY: You've got to just get to the honest place where you say, "I may have a bias, I may have some psychological discomfort with Black management."

RODNEY HARRISON: It hurts me as a former player because, you know, we're good enough for you to use our body, but we're not good enough for you to use our mind.

NFL FILMS: Only one man commands the flight of a football. He is the quarterback.

DAVE ZIRIN: And then, of course, there's the history of Black quarterbacks in the NFL.

NFL FILMS: Like Hollywood's matinee idols, pro football's quarterbacks draw the camera's eye with a magnetic allure.

DAVE ZIRIN: For years, being a quarterback was thought of as a thinking man's position and only suitable for white players. There's a long and ugly history in this country of seeing Black athletes, including Black football players, as intellectually inferior to whites and as undisciplined buffoons. So, for decades, Black quarterbacks who were stars in college were switched to wide receivers and other positions when they got to the NFL.

HARRY REASONER: The quarterback is supposed to be the smart guy, and Negroes infer the owners don't think any of them are smart enough. Understandably, this angers them. If you are white, you overlook the issues and enjoy the game. On the other hand, if you are Black, it must sometimes chew at your insides.

WARREN MOON: I even had a problem, you know, just being able to play quarterback at my high school as an African American because they didn't want to see an African-American guy in those type of leadership roles.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Doug Williams, he is a man about to step solidly into the pages of social history.

DAVE ZIRIN: These conceptions weren't shattered until Doug Williams took Washington, of all teams, to the 1988 Super Bowl, and as the first Black quarterback to ever start the big game broke every passing record that the league had ever seen.

NFL ANNOUNCER: I hope he puts to bed once and for all about the Black athlete in professional football.

DAVE ZIRIN: But while there's no question that players like Doug Williams and Warren Moon opened the door for Black quarterbacks in the NFL today, Black QBs continue to be stereotyped as more athletic than intelligent. And the percentage of Black quarterbacks is still strikingly low for a league that is roughly two-thirds Black.

JASON REID: For everything that the pioneers, the guys that we were talking about, for everything they accomplished and endured, still dealing racism.

QUINCY AVERY: The interesting thing to me is that we see a lot of stars that are Black quarterbacks. Right? We don't see many average Black quarterbacks. Right? You're not seeing many Black backup quarterbacks. There's a few, but it's not many.

DAVE ZIRIN: The cold truth is that this is a sport that revels in the violence of the Black body for the consumption of white fans, as well as the profit of white owners. And it has a major issue with any kind of Black autonomy and control.

And there's no question this is one of the reasons that Colin Kaepernick has posed such a threat to the NFL.

NFL ANNOUNCER: Kaepernick ... Touchdown 49ers!

DAVE ZIRIN: Not only is he a quarterback – he's a *Black* quarterback. And he decided to use his position as quarterback, the most high-profile position in the NFL, the most public position in sports, to defy the NFL's power structure. And on top of that, used the national anthem as his staging ground to do it.

STEVE WYCHE: Colin Kaepernick, what he did and what he said crosses sports boundaries.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOLOUS: The 49ers quarterback refusing to stand for the national anthem before games.

NEWS COMMENTATOR: In protest over racial injustice and police brutality.

DAVE ZIRIN: That summer, two murders committed by police had been caught on tape – one of a man named Philando Castile and the other of Alton Sterling. These police shootings were taking place in poor Black communities where a lot of these players were from. So they felt this issue very intimately.

MICHAEL BENNETT: Even though we're playing in his league, and we're able to do these things on Sunday, we still are people, and we still are connected to the things and issues that are happening around us.

NEWS CLIP: Sterling was killed by police last week ...

DAVE ZIRIN: And they had people on social media saying, "Who's going to stand up? Are you going to stand up and try to do something about this?" This is what Kaepernick was responding to.

COLIN KAEPERNICK: A lot of my teammates come from areas where this might be a situation. Their families may be put in this situation. There's people being murdered unjustly. Cops are getting paid leave for killing people. That's not right. That's not right by anyone's standards.

DAVE ZIRIN: And the reaction was absolute rage.

NEWS CLIP: Seven NFL executives, they were anonymous, but the consensus, he says, is that the front offices *hate* Kaepernick. *Hate* is the word. *Hate* him. They called him a traitor.

DAVE ZIRIN: NFL executives immediately made it clear that Black athletes using their platform to try to peacefully raise awareness about racism were somehow un-American and an embarrassment to the league.

NEWS CLIP: He's an embarrassment to the NFL ...

JEMELE HILL: I've seen far more press conferences of GMs and owners and coaches sticking by their guys amid some pretty murky and disgusting circumstances. But that's all good. But here's somebody who's trying to stand for justice and for equality, and you consider that to be somehow embarrassing your NFL?

DAVE ZIRIN: When the dust settled, Kaepernick paid for raising these issues with his job, colluded against and shut out of the league by NFL owners.

NEWS CLIP: The quarterback who led the San Francisco 49ers to a Super Bowl four years ago can't find an NFL team.

DAVE ZIRIN: But NFL owners and executives didn't stop at going after Kaepernick themselves. They also stood by and said and did *nothing* while Donald Trump and a rising chorus of overwhelmingly white reactionary voices revived every racist trope in the book to bully and vilify Kaepernick and other Black players who took a knee.

NEWS CLIPS:

--They're ungrateful millennial millionaires who won't stand for their own anthem!

-- I think it's a little bit ludicrous that people are raising their fists when they're really filled with cash!

-- I am a girl who doesn't know a lot about football, but I do know an ungrateful jerk when I see one!

DAVE ZIRIN: During the time he was taking a knee, Kaepernick had given away more than a million dollars to the kinds of grassroots community organizations that have trouble keeping the lights on. But that wasn't enough for a lot of people.

FOOTBALL FAN 1: Why don't they get off their knees and do something? Spend some money. Get off your knees --

FOOTBALL FAN 2: They're a bunch of spoiled athletes!

FOOTBALL FAN 1: -- and walk the walk.

DAVE ZIRIN: The league also remained silent and demonstrated zero leadership when a chorus of commentators and sports figures revived the long history of white people of questionable intelligence demeaning Black minds.

GREG GUTFELD: This is a silly story, it's getting sillier to me, Tucker.

TUCKER CARLSON: Yeah, I mean, this guy is a child with a head injury. He's a moron. He doesn't know what he's doing.

GREGG JARRETT: These players are so uninformed or stupid, I'm not sure which, they don't understand what the national anthem and the American flag stand for.

DAVE ZIRIN: Then the league held its fire and cowered on the sidelines when Donald Trump told millions of Fox News viewers that Kaepernick and other Black players should maybe find another country to live in.

DONALD TRUMP: Maybe you shouldn't be in the country. You have to stand proudly for the national anthem.

DAVE ZIRIN: A classic race-baiting message, with its "Go Back to Africa" overtones, that clearly resonated with Trump's white-nationalist, nativist base.

CUOY GRIFFIN: I got a better idea. Why don't you go back to Africa and form your little football teams over in Africa?

DAVE ZIRIN: The player protests had clearly provoked something deep, ugly, and primordial in the American consciousness. Kaepernick's jersey and likeness were burned and hanged. He faced death threats. And a lot of people got off on playing out their fantasies of doing violence against him.

NEWS CLIP: The Navy is investigating a pair of videos showing a demonstration of military dogs attacking a man wearing a Colin Kaepernick jersey.

DAVE ZIRIN: And the backlash against Kaepernick and the protests wasn't limited to Trump supporters on the right.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOLOUS: What's your reaction to Colin Kaepernick?

SEN. TIM KAINE: I mean, I'd do it differently. I think if you really thought about issues and about this country, you'd do it differently. And when I heard him explain his rationale, it didn't really make that much sense to me.

DAVE ZIRIN: And there was no missing how much these perspectives were shaped by race. From the very start, polls showed that huge majorities of Black Americans supported Kaepernick and the protests, had no trouble understanding what Kaepernick was saying, and saw the protest as an act of courage.

KOBE BRYANT: When Colin initiated what he did, it brought a sense of immediacy that wasn't there before. It brought it to a national level. And I think having the bravery to be able to do that is something that we should all stand for.

DAVE ZIRIN: But in almost equally large numbers, white Americans opposed Kaepernick and the protests.

TOMI LAHREN: Colin, how dare you sit there and blame white people for the problems of minority communities? When will those in Black communities take a step back and take some responsibility for the problems in Black communities? Because it seems to me blaming white people for all of your problems might make you the racist.

DAVE ZIRIN: All of this presented the NFL with a very clear choice.

DONALD TRUMP: We're proud of our country. We respect our flag.

DAVE ZIRIN: They could stay on the right side of Trump, the polls, and majority-white sentiment. Or they could be on the right side of history and help steer the conversation back to police brutality and racial injustice.

DONALD TRUMP: 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! He's fired!"

NEWS CLIP: Trump's tough words set off demonstrations across the league.

DAVE ZIRIN: After Donald Trump called for firing Black players who protested, the league did its best to signal that it was finally ready to stand up for its players in what seemed to be a miraculous conversion to the cause of racial justice.

NEWS CLIP: Rapper Jay-Z has agreed to partner with the National Football League to promote social justice initiatives and expand entertainment options.

ROGER GOODELL: We listened to our players. We have the greatest platform in the world, and we're using it in a very positive way.

DAVE ZIRIN: But even as Roger Goodell and team owners were singing their own praises for giving Black players a voice, they were still doing everything in their power to silence protests all together.

NEWS ANCHOR: The NFL is out tonight with a new policy on the national anthem...

DAVE ZIRIN: League owners not only moved to ban protests in 2018 ...

ROGER GOODELL: If anyone is on the field and is disrespectful to the anthem or the flag, there would be a fine from the league.

DAVE ZIRIN: ... they also continued working behind the scenes to make sure Colin Kaepernick never stepped foot on the field again.

CHRIS KLUWE: I think the key takeaway here is that the owners were not interested in acting on any of the players' concerns. The owners were only interested in trying to get good PR.

DAVE ZIRIN: In its "Mission and Values" statement, the NFL proudly and boldly declares that it embraces its unique leadership role in society, assumes the responsibility that comes with that role, and does the right thing – even if it's unpopular. But at every step of the way, NFL executives and team owners responded the way you'd expect the heads of any multibillion-dollar entertainment corporation to respond. By bending to popular opinion to protect market share, profits, and especially their own power and control.

YAHOO FINANCE HOST: Hi, Jerry, it's Kristin here. I'm wondering if in your mind, athletes should just be quiet, play their sport, or should they use their platform to talk about issues that matter to them?

JERRY JONES: One thing about the NFL – politics are not good for us in any way. We've got to stay away from politics.

DAVE ZIRIN: The result has been a case study in the blatant double standards that apply in the NFL. Even as the league has glorified American militarism and weaponry, and helped sell disastrous wars from Vietnam to Iraq and beyond, that's been seen as focusing on football and football alone, and hasn't been criticized as a political distraction or intrusion at all

ROGER GOODELL: It's not, we're not, we're not looking to get into politics. What we're looking to do is continue to keep people focused on football.

DAVE ZIRIN: And so it has gone. Even as the league has spent more money than any other big-time pro sport lobbying Washington politicians, donated disproportionately to an increasingly right-wing Republican Party, and struck one deal after another with government officials to build gleaming billion-dollar stadiums at taxpayer expense while the cities and schools around these stadiums crumble ... there's been little to no outcry about the political interests of owners or the exercise of political power mixing inappropriately with sport.

But Black athletes peacefully protesting injustice, defying the NFL's power structure, and potentially alienating the league's majority white fan base? For NFL owners and guardians of the dominant political order in media, that's the kind of political activity that has no place in sport and must be stamped out at all costs.

JASON WHITLOCK: These hyper left-wing values that Kaepernick and these other guys are bringing to-- it's disruptive to the culture of football.

DAVE ZIRIN: The bottom line is that Kaepernick represented a direct threat to the NFL's brand, to its financial interests, to its ability to control the men who put their bodies on the line and are treated as expendable commodities. And so, NFL owners wanted him to be a ghost story, a memory to frighten future players from speaking out.

ROB PARKER: They're looking at him – he was the face of it – and we're going to punish you! All the other guys in the league, you better not step out of line. Next time you do that, we'll do the same thing to you.

WILLIAM RHODEN: I think a lot of guys saw how this very powerful institution eliminated somebody's career. You know, they said, we will take you out. That's why martyrs are very far and few between.

DAVE ZIRIN: But what NFL owners didn't realize at the time, of course, was just how much their effort to turn Kaepernick into a ghost story would come back to haunt them.

“A MEASURE OF POLITICAL HOPE”

NEWS CLIPS:

-- The country faces a moment of reckoning.

-- One of the biggest nationwide days of protest since the killing of George Floyd in police custody.

-- It has been four years since Colin Kaepernick first took a knee. But the reason we're talking about it now is entirely different.

DAVE ZIRIN: For a lot of Americans, Black and white, the sight of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd was like a horrific inversion of Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest against police violence, trying to start a conversation that clearly hadn't been heard.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Tens of thousands of people packing streets.

-- Thousands taking to the streets, calling for an end to police violence ...

DAVE ZIRIN: And so, four years after Kaepernick's knee first hit the ground, as the largest demonstrations in American history rose up against police violence and racial injustice, the peaceful gesture that NFL executives and owners had done so much to help vilify and tried so hard to erase from the public memory became a dominant symbol of a reawakened civil rights movement.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Thousands across the country kneeled in the middle of American streets. That iconic image, a lone player protesting ...

-- 56% of Americans say it is appropriate for athletes to kneel. George Floyd has changed everything.

DAVE ZIRIN: It was only then, when polls finally made it safe to do so, that the NFL finally decided to reverse its messaging on the player protests.

ROGER GOODELL: We, the National Football League, believe Black Lives Matter. We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier. And encourage all to speak out peacefully.

ALICIA KEYS (SINGING): Lift every voice and sing ...

NEWS CLIPS:

-- The league is taking a large and visual stand against racism.

-- The phrases "It Takes All of Us" and "End Racism" would appear in NFL end zones.

DAVE ZIRIN: The league emblazoned its stadiums with words of social uplift. It featured the Black national anthem before games.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Washington's NFL team buckling under pressure.

-- FedEx threatened to pull its name.

DAVE ZIRIN: Even Washington team owner Dan Snyder finally agreed to dump his racist team name under intense pressure from corporate sponsors who suddenly realized that racism might not sell as well as it once did.

NEWS CLIP: Pepsi now says we believe it is time for a change.

DAVE ZIRIN: But from the start, the NFL's carefully crafted words and images raised as many questions as they answered.

AL SHARPTON: Don't apologize! Give Colin Kaepernick a job back! Don't come with some empty apology, take a man's livelihood, strip a man down of his talents, and four years later, when the whole world is watching you, all of a sudden you go and do a FaceTime talking about you sorry?

HOWARD BRYANT: You cannot have this. You can't have all of this commentary. You can't say Black Lives Matter if you're not going to recognize the Black life that you ruined. I'm looking at all of these different organizations out there, putting these statements out about equality and about togetherness and about having people's backs. And now I want to see, you know, what you're about. I want to see what you're going to actually do. Is it a reckoning or is it just another dance?

JEMELE HILL: Ultimately, big picture, it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything because Roger Goodell, he works for the owners. He is not the NFL owners. You haven't heard much from them, have you? What also matters is the systemic racism inside the NFL. Three Black coaches, they've never had a Black majority owner. Ultimately, until you have 32 NFL owners who actually are on board with changing that, what really are they fixing? Nothing.

NFL LATINX HERITAGE MONTH AD

DAVE ZIRIN: And these questions haven't gone away. No matter how hard the league has tried to signal how sincere they are about fighting for marginalized communities with marketing and branding campaigns designed to deodorize the stench of its own politics, it hasn't been able to cover up the systemic rot that still courses through the league.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Tonight, the NFL is reeling from a scandal involving one of its top coaches. Jon Gruden resigned from the Las Vegas Raiders over emails he sent that were anti-Black, anti-gay, and anti-woman.

-- Make no mistake, this story is about a whole lot more than one bigoted NFL coach.

DAVE ZIRIN: The Jon Gruden Washington football team scandal that broke in 2021 revealed the glaring disconnect between the league's attempts to brand itself as a positive social force that represents the best of America, and a corporate culture that continues to be steeped in hypermasculine posturing, sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, bullying, and flag-waving jingoism.

NEWS CLIPS:

-- Last week, it was learned Gruden used a racist trope to describe NFL union chief DeMaurice Smith. Then, even more troubling emails calling the league's first openly gay player, Michael Sam, a queer. Disparaging players who protested during the national anthem. Panning the hiring of female referees. And mocking league efforts to reduce concussions. According to *The Times*, Gruden also exchanged email photos with other men showing women wearing only bikini bottoms, including NFL cheerleaders.

-- It's not just Jon Gruden. Why did he feel so comfortable?

RANDY MOSS: You know, I fell in love with the game of football, Sam, at six years old.

NFL ANNOUNCER: What a great catch by Randy Moss!

RANDY MOSS: And I get emotional talking about it because of situations like this. We talk about leadership. We give guys these big contracts. And for us to be moving back instead of forward in the 21st century – like I said, man, National Football League, this hurts me. The clock is ticking, man. I'm sorry.

DAVE ZIRIN: But as difficult and dark as the politics lurking behind *The Shield* can seem, this is a sport that also provides a measure of political hope. Because so much of how we understand

patriotism, race, and masculinity comes from the NFL, maybe, just maybe, players who challenge these tropes can be a part of the solution and turn them on their heads.

SCOOP JACKSON: America is now forced to deal with the fact that we are now in the midst of a power shift.

DAVE ZIRIN: We've seen this on the field of play itself, where the long legacy of bias against Black minds and Black leadership is being shattered like never before. Today we have a whole new generation of young Black quarterbacks who are not only defying this racist legacy with absolutely brilliant performances, but also revolutionizing the way the NFL football game is played.

But that's not the only reason for hope. Look at the players who have used their hyper-exalted, brought-to-you-by-Nike platform to say something about the world in recent years. It's not just Colin Kaepernick. It's so many others.

ERIC REID: As we said when we started, Colin and I, nothing will change unless you talk about it. So, we're going to continue to talk about it. There's always opposition when you speak on topics like I'm speaking on. But I'm a Black man in America. I grew up Black in America. You can't tell me that what I've experienced and what I've seen is not true.

DAVE ZIRIN: And it hasn't just been NFL players. Over the past few years, we've seen professional athletes across the sports world stand up against injustice. And we've seen white allies as well.

MEGAN RAPINOE: What are you doing? What is everyone doing to help? Because everyone knows that we have a problem in this country around racial injustice. And it's all this bullshit about the flag.

NEWS CLIP: Hundreds of white nationalists, some wearing what appeared to be ...

DAVE ZIRIN: We saw this immediately following the deadly spectacle of white-supremacist rage that exploded in Charlottesville, Virginia, a year after Kaepernick first took a knee ... when Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Chris Long, who actually grew up in Charlottesville, became the first white player to show public solidarity with Black players who were trying to keep the protests alive.

CHRIS LONG: If anybody really has an issue with somebody being an ally of somebody fighting for equality in a week like this, against white supremacy, that's sad. I'm here to show support as a white athlete.

DAVE ZIRIN: And we saw this same courageous refusal to bend to unjust power when thousands of young people from all across America, long before it was popular, took a knee or

raised their fists to show solidarity with Kaepernick and the fight against racial injustice, often at great personal risk.

JADEN LEWIS: This is giving us another platform to show how we feel.

ARMANI TURNER-JENKINS: Right now, it might not be a bunch of people that agree with everything we saying, you know what I mean? Because the flag mean a lot to a lot of people.

ISAIAH MAYS: My dad was a veteran. He served to protect us, not the flag. He didn't – the flag is cloth. You know what I mean? It's what the flag represented and it's what us as a group, as America, represents.

DAVE ZIRIN: For this generation, having each other's backs isn't just an empty slogan in a slick ad campaign designed to burnish the brand. It's actually something they believe in enough to act on and to sacrifice for. And all along there were others from beyond the sports world who refused to follow the NFL's lead in trying to vilify and silence Kaepernick and the player protests.

NEWS CLIP: Veterans for Kaepernick, that was the hashtag ...

DAVE ZIRIN: We saw it in the statements of combat veterans and active servicemen and women in America's armed forces, who argued from the start that Kaepernick's stance was entirely consistent with what the military is supposed to be fighting for.

NEWS CLIP: A group of veterans is now getting behind Kaepernick.

RICHARD ALLEN SMITH: I saw a lot of folks claiming that Colin Kaepernick was disrespecting troops or somehow disrespecting veterans with the protests that he's making, a lot of those people not having served themselves. And I think me and my colleagues who signed this letter really wanted to make sure that there was a voice out there saying, those people don't speak for us.

DAVE ZIRIN: Over the next decade, I expect the NFL to continue to be a contested space where these ideas, pumped in straight from the owner's box – like hypermasculinity, militarism, and racism – are challenged.

KAVITHA DAVIDSON: You know, the owners are still very much part of this kind of good-old-boys club, and that does trickle down. That being said, that is changing. I mean, we have seen players become more accepting and become more progressive.

NEWS CLIP: It is a groundbreaking moment in the National Football League. For the first time, an active player has come out as gay.

CARL NASSIB: What's up, people? I'm Carl Nassib. I just want to take a quick moment to say that I'm gay. I'm a pretty private person, so I hope you guys know that I'm really not doing this for attention. I just think that representation and visibility are so important.

ZACH BANNER: The bravery and just awesomeness that Carl displayed last night for sticking out on his own. I commend that. I support that. And I back that. It's stuff like that that needs to keep happening in the NFL because we represent the rest of the U.S. and the rest of the world.

NEWS REPORTER: Is your generation of football player different than the generation or two that came before when it comes to human rights?

BRENDON AYANBADEJO: Oh, I mean, absolutely. I mean, the young guys now playing in the NFL are a lot more open-minded, a lot more progressive. It's an idea of where we're going as a nation.

MICHAEL BENNETT: Between the 1990s and the 2000s, there wasn't really many athletes who were speaking on social issues. I was a generation who didn't get to see Muhammad Ali, who did get to see John Carlos. I didn't get to see those magnificent things when people stood up for what they believe in. Now we have young kids being aware of the situation, and it really started from the empathy and compassion of the players in the NFL

JOHN AMAECHE: I think now what we are seeing is a new strident set of young athletes who are saying, "You know what? It's not enough to be neutral. At some point as a person of great power and influence, as an athlete, you either stand for equality or you don't."

DAVE ZIRIN: This is why the NFL, beneath their posturing, reacts fearfully in the face of player autonomy. Expect more of it in the years to come. Expect players who challenge our conventional notions of masculinity. Expect Black NFL players who refuse to be fearful in the face of job insecurity. Expect players to speak out against our forever wars in the face of the NFL's "Salute to Service." In other words, expect the NFL, a multibillion-dollar profit machine that inherited the wind, to reap the whirlwind.

WHITNEY HOUSTON (SINGING): And the home of the brave!

[END]