

# What Donald Trump and Nike Have in Common

One year ago this month, President Trump spoke at a campaign rally in Alabama in support of Luther Strange who was running on the GOP ticket for the U.S. Senate. Whatever he said about Strange (who by the way lost to a Democrat – *in Alabama!*) has long been forgotten. But what riled his base that night, whether the president's supporters were in the arena or at home watching on TV, and what is still resonating today, was what he said about the NFL and the players who silently protested what they see as racism in America by taking a knee during the national anthem.

Throwing red meat to the crowd, the president said that NFL owners should fire the players who protest. "Get that son of a bitch off the field right now," Mr. Trump bellowed. "*He's fired!*"

The Trump fans loved it. They cheered and nodded in agreement. The president got what he was after – a hot cultural issue that he knew would excite his base – and divide the country.

Donald Trump is a man who gives cynicism a bad name. Even though the protest movement was fading by the time he went to Alabama, he instinctively understood that he could capitalize on a social issue that portrayed highly paid athletes, most of them black, as un-American. He saw a tiny campfire and poured gasoline on it hoping it would become a political inferno. It did. And the flame is still burning.

Can you say Nike?

Of all the athletes in the whole wide world Nike could have chosen to be the face of the company's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary "Just Do

It" campaign, Nike chose Colin Kaepernick. In a close-up black and white shot of the former NFL quarterback, who is staring right into the camera, you can see these words: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

Neither Mr. Trump nor Nike started the fire; neither was the instigator of the culture wars in America. But both came to the same conclusion: that there was something to be gained by keeping the fire burning.

I guess we didn't have enough polarization in America before Donald Trump brought up the NFL protest out of the blue ... or before Nike decided to team up with the most controversial athlete on the planet.

(A brief aside I'd like to share with you: I never got worked up over the kneeling protest. I would have preferred that the players picked another venue. I would have preferred they protested fatherlessness in black America or senseless violent crime rather than what they see as pervasive racism and social injustice in America. But the protest was silent. No one jumped up and down disrupting the national anthem. So, as I say, I didn't lose any sleep over it. I was far more upset, though, with the socks Kaepernick chose to wear on the practice field – the ones that portrayed cops as pigs.)

Nike didn't get to be a multi-billion dollar company by making reckless decisions. They know exactly what they're doing. They didn't pick Kaepernick to be the face of their campaign without foreseeing the blowback that was coming.

Nike made a conscious business decision; it played the social justice card. Sure, they'd rather their customers didn't light Nike stuff on fire and boycott the company, but they knew that some of their customers would do just that. And they went with Kaepernick anyway.

Nike is a company that makes a lot of money selling sports apparel to young consumers here in America and overseas. And

with young people Donald Trump is about as popular as Legionnaire's disease.

Still, why pick Kaepernick of all the athletes they might have chosen? Why stir up such a needless controversy? Because the brain trust at Nike understands that controversy can be good for business.

The business Nike loses from older more conservative consumers, they figure, will be more than made up for with left-leaning social justice millennials who think Colin Kaepernick is a courageous hero not afraid to speak out against racism in America.

Donald Trump and Nike may be very different in very important ways. They have different values, different worldviews. But they have one thing in common: Both know how to rev up their base. Both are good at needlessly polarizing a country that is already way, way too polarized.