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Restaurants that ban NFL games amid anthem protests should take a deeper look at their own business

Tim Carman, The Washington Post **Published 7:34 pm, Tuesday, September 26, 2017**

The backlash was inevitable: Some restaurants around the country have decided to stop broadcasting NFL games in a show of support of the president, the troops, the flag and all things patriotic.

Among the restaurants that say they will not broadcast NFL games or at least the games of a particular team whose players took a knee during the national anthem this past weekend: The Palmetto Restaurant and Ale House in Greenville, South Carolina; the Canyon Road Barn and Grill in Breckenridge, Texas; Borio's Restaurant in Cicero, New York, and WOW Cafe and Wingery in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana.

On its Facebook page, the owners of Canyon Road Barn and Grill wrote, "Freedom of speech being exercised in this establishment so COME FOR THE FOOD BUT STAY AT HOME IF YOU WANT TO WATCH AN NFL GAME:)." "

The owners of Borio's posted a sign that reads, in part, "If and when this show of disrespect ends, we will be happy to show the product on our restaurant again. America is great we can all make decisions!"

Much has already been written and said about the NFL teams that used the pregame anthem to protest the words of President Trump, who suggested that players who take a knee during the patriotic ceremony should be fired. Trump then did his best George C. Scott impersonation and called such players a nasty name, as if he had confused American protesters for, well, Russians.

It's almost impossible to peel back the many layers of complexity behind the president's words, the athletes' protests and the public's ongoing response. Elements of race, class, privilege, law and history play into this unfolding drama, and the restaurants above have every right to express their displeasure with the NFL and its players over their recent actions. It's written right into the First Amendment.

But these restaurants have now entered a hugely charged discussion, and they have been getting plenty of public feedback, pro and con. The Canyon Road Barn and Grill's Facebook page is a good example, and the owner, a former U.S. Marine, is happily engaging with all comers, though no one seems to be budging an inch. Each side remains deeply entrenched.

I could say a lot about these restaurants and their boycotts of the NFL.

I could say that these places have reduced patriotism to a simple act of allegiance to the flag, with no apparent sympathy for the people who feel their country has no allegiance to them.

I could say that these places are resentful of rich athletes trying to politicize a weekend entertainment.

I could say that these places will be, many years from now, on the wrong side of history.

But I won't say any of that. Instead, I'll ask these restaurateurs to take a look at their own menus. The owners of these fine establishments serve tacos, nachos, hummus, stuffed jalapeños, fried mozzarella, eggplant parmigiana, Greek salad, pizzas and on and on.

Don't worry: I'm not about to turn this into a screed on cultural appropriation. I just want to remind the restaurateurs that these foods, no matter how bastardized they've become in the States, originated in countries whose immigrants have had their own problems with the dominant culture in America. The examples are endless, but allow me to pull out two random pages from U.S. history.

In her excellent book, "97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement," Jane Ziegelman wrote this passage about early Italian immigrants:

"Immigration officials bluntly referred to the Southern Italian as America's 'worst immigrants,' a judgment echoed in the daily papers. 'Lazy,' 'ignorant,' and 'clannish' were just a few of the adjectives most commonly linked with Italians by the popular press. 'Violent' was another oft-mentioned Italian characteristic. American

newspapers kept a running tally of crimes committed by the Black Hand, an early name for Italian organized crime, paying special attention to any case that involved explosives. (Bombs were a fairly common means of extortion among gangster of the period.) America's fascination with Italian gangsters helped reinforce the argument that Italians were violent by nature."

In the early 20th century, Mexican immigrants faced graver dangers. Take this passage from "Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race," written by Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz:

"By the turn of the century, egregiously racist practices against Mexican Americans - including lynching, school segregation, and segmented labor markets - had become commonplace. Mexicans who transgressed their place experienced unparalleled levels of white mob violence. William Carrigan finds that from 1848 to 1879 Mexicans were lynched, often by the Ku Klux Klan, at an astonishing rate of 473 per 100,000."

My point is not to rub the noses of modern white America in the dirty deeds of their ancestors. It's to make a larger point: People from all over the globe, whether they came here of their own free will or were forcefully brought here, have had to fight for their place in America. They've had to shout, argue and protest for the basic rights enshrined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the sacred document that marked our country's separation from its own oppressor. U.S. history is marked by one immigrant story after another, each with a similar theme: They're all searching for an equal place in the very country that has vigorously tried to reject and marginalize them.

Yet it can be easier for Mexican tacos to find a place on a South Carolina menu than for a Mexican immigrant to find a place in America. Why is that? The easy answer would be the tacos pose no threat, real or imagined, to an American way of life that some want to preserve in amber.

These struggles for equality continue today, amid talks of border walls, travel bans and immigration crackdowns. The struggles don't go away at noon on Sunday when your favorite football team walks onto the gridiron. They don't magically disappear, either, just because an athlete earns millions of dollars a year to play a kid's game.

The NFL, it should be noted, is an essentially black league. By that, I mean that nearly 70 percent of its players are African Americans, according to an investigation by ESPN's the Undeclared. No doubt many of those players, as rich as they may be, carry the scars of being black in America. To their credit, a growing number of players have not remained silent, content with their fortune. They've decided to use their Sunday afternoon platform to protest the indignities and injustices that continue to be inflicted on African Americans.

They are using their jobs to protest, just like the restaurateurs are using theirs.

Some people clearly don't want to feel uncomfortable while watching the NFL. They would rather watch in peace, free from any reminder of racial injustice, even when the reminder is as passive as taking a knee during the national anthem. Their America is too fragile to withstand such a protest.

Frankly, we all might want to take a cue from Gregg Popovich, coach of the San Antonio Spurs, who characteristically popped off on the issue of race in America.

"Obviously, race is the elephant in the room, and we all understand that. But unless it is talked about, constantly, it's not going to get better," he said. "People get bored. 'Oh, is it that again? They're pulling the race card again. Why do we have to talk about that?' Well, because it's uncomfortable, and there has to be an uncomfortable element in the discourse for anything to change."

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