

# ‘True Champions and Incredible Patriots’: The Transformation of the Ceremonial White House Visit under President Trump

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## **Abstract:**

In the United States, a championship-winning sports team’s ceremonial visit to the White House has become a familiar tradition. Beginning nearly a century ago when Calvin Coolidge invited the Washington Senators to celebrate their second American League Pennant in 1924, the White House visit has evolved into such a common occurrence that we tend to take it for granted as a public relations ploy for the political elites and sports darlings of the moment, ultimately bearing little consequence for either. Yet the rhetorical strategies involved in these events reveal shifting understandings of sports’ role in American culture along with interrelated anxieties about what defines the United States as a nation. Especially in the context of a turbulent and divisive social climate under President Trump, the ceremonial White House visit has become an unlikely stage for displaying overarching ideological tensions. The controversies surrounding Trump’s invitations and disinvitations, as well as players’ acceptances and rejections, illuminate the inherently political dimensions of sport as athletes conform to, negotiate, or in many cases subvert societal expectations. Mounting disruptions of an enduring White House ritual have initiated a dialogue about leadership, honor, and freedom, foundational tenets of the US and the office that represents it.

**Keywords:** US Presidents, White House rituals, athlete activism, sports rhetoric, national ideologies

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### **The White House Visit**

In the United States, a championship-winning sports team's ceremonial visit to the White House has become a familiar tradition. Players will shake hands and pose for pictures with the President, tour the grounds of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and perhaps present a gift to the commander-in-chief in the form of a personalized jersey or some other token bearing the team's trademark logo and colors. Beginning nearly a century ago when Calvin Coolidge invited the Washington Senators (interchangeably referred to as the Nationals) to celebrate their second American League Pennant in 1924, the practice would not become customary until the Reagan administration institutionalized the ritual in the 1980s. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the proverbial leader of the free world now hosts around a dozen sports organizations per year. In fact, the White House visit has evolved into such a common occurrence that we tend to take it for granted as a public relations ploy for the political elites and sports darlings of the moment, ultimately bearing little consequence for either.

Yet the rhetorical strategies involved in these events reveal shifting understandings of sports' role in American culture along with interrelated anxieties about what defines the United States as a nation. Tracing the development of the ceremonial White House visit from the Reagan presidency to a turbulent and divisive social climate under President Trump reveals an unlikely yet increasingly potent stage for displaying these ideological tensions. The controversies surrounding Trump's invitations and disinvitations, as well as players' acceptances and rejections, illuminate the inherently political dimensions of sport itself as athletes conform to, negotiate, or in many cases subvert societal expectations. Those who opted to go to the White House often cited a sense of patriotic duty and the appeal of an once-in-a-lifetime experience. Many sought to actively distance their attendance from the political sphere, instead emphasizing the unifying and celebratory aspects of the tradition. However, athletes have increasingly seized the platform as an opportunity to speak out on issues of consequence, including racial injustice and systemic inequality. While a historical precedent certainly exists for such activities, they have only intensified in a volatile political environment both complicated and enhanced by the affordances of social media. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, athletes have mobilized the enduring ritual of the White House visit to initiate a dialogue about leadership, honor, and freedom itself, foundational tenets of the United States and the office that represents it. During such ceremonies, the celebrations represent a highly symbolic theater where sports and politics are inextricably and undeniably linked. I primarily analyze the Presidential Papers of the United States and supplement with contemporary news sources to examine these events from the Reagan years to the initial stages of the Trump era, arguing that they evolve to reflect an intensification of partisan politics as well as a renewed surge of athletic activism. Where politicians once wielded disproportionate power in articulating the meaning of these demonstrations to the public, athletes have increasingly challenged these sentiments and occupied a more central role in controlling the narratives and myths surrounding these rituals.

### **Presidents and Sports**

The enduring connection between the presidents of the United States, sports, and American culture has proven a subject of interest for various interrelated disciplines, informing the work of sport

historians as well as scholars of presidential studies, political communication, and rhetoric. Previous literature has approached the athletic endeavors and preferences of past presidents as a lens through which we might better understand their policies and passions.<sup>1</sup> Accounting for the intersections of historical context and individual upbringing, prior research has considered the political and personal forces shaping the fitness policies of Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, in addition to the direct presidential interventions by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson's reform of American football.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have also explored presidents' investment in sports as a demonstration of national pride and power in times of both domestic hardship and international conflict. For instance, Franklin D. Roosevelt mobilized baseball's position as a budding national pastime to raise much-needed morale during the Great Depression and World War II.<sup>3</sup> Later, Cold War tensions placed a spotlight on international competition as a symbolic sphere that illuminated overarching strategies of global dominance and political influence. Spurred, in large part, by a disappointing American performance at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Presidents Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford advanced athletic policies and initiatives designed to combat the Soviet influence by emerging victorious in sport contests.<sup>4</sup> Considering the historic role of sports in building and uniting the nation, often in opposition to external enemies and the values that they are believed to represent, Donald Trump's relationship to sports, and particularly championship teams, demands further attention, as it has thus far been defined by internal conflict and a competing vision of America itself.

Presidents have adopted the language of sports for generations, activating concepts of grit, teamwork, and self-sacrifice in their efforts to describe the defining attributes of the nation and unite its citizens under an ideal code of conduct and philosophy towards life. As scholars have observed, drawing from a familiar sports lexicon effectively positions the president as a relatable human being who enjoys everyday pursuits and leisure activities.<sup>5</sup> Nixon's selection of a hypothetical all-time all-star baseball team in the election year of 1972 proved a successful public relations gambit that emphasized his fan credentials to would-be voters, while the perception of George W. Bush as a down-to-earth "good ol' boy" partly stemmed from a profound love of baseball that endeared him to supporters and distanced him from Democrat

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<sup>1</sup> John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew T. Bowers and Thomas M. Hunt, "The Presidential Council on Physical Fitness and the Systematisation of Children's Play in America," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 11 (2011): 1496-1511; John Sayle Watterson, "Political Football: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and the Gridiron Reform Movement," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (1995): 555-564.

<sup>3</sup> Ron Briley, "Don't Let Hitler (or the Depression) Kill Baseball: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the National Pastime, 1932-1945," In *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Shaping of American Popular Culture*, eds. Nancy Beck Young, William D. Pederson, and Byron W. Daynes (M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 119-133.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas M. Hunt, "Countering the Soviet Threat in the Olympics Medal Race: The Amateur Sports Act of 1978 and American Athletics Policy Reform," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 6 (2007): 796-818; Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Moscow versus Los Angeles: The Nixon White House Wages Cold War in the Olympics Selection Process," *Cold War History* 9, no. 1 (2009): 135-157.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Marquis, "Les présidents américains et le sport: pouvoirs de l'exercice et exercice du pouvoir, de Theodore Roosevelt à Barack Obama," *Histoire@ Politique* 2 (2014): 10-31.

rival John Kerry.<sup>6</sup> Sports rhetoric not only serves to confirm the popular interests of presidents, but also to align an apparently universal and timeless version of American ideology to the specific political interests of the administration in power. Through deeply-entrenched sports rituals and traditions, presidents seize the opportunity to reflect on a particular iteration of the American experience that is most conducive to their agenda in a given historical moment.

While ceremonial practices, such as the first pitch, the National Anthem, and the singing of “God Bless America” during the seventh-inning stretch, have long blurred the boundaries between sports, politics, and religion, the traditional visit to the White House by championship-winning teams amplifies these connections (and confections).<sup>7</sup> In the most thorough investigation of these rituals to date, Michael David Hester argues that these “presidential sports encomia,” “whether addressing civic responsibility, patriotism, or race relations, ... ultimately connect athletic achievement to American ideals.”<sup>8</sup> In the context of high-profile (dis)invitations, social media sparring, and a surge of athlete activism, the presidential sports encomia of the Trump administration warrants further examination. This essay dissects the rhetoric surrounding these rituals at a time when commonsense notions of American ideals are increasingly up for debate. Tracing the ideological tensions that have underpinned White House visits from Reagan to Trump demonstrates the splintering of an ostensibly cohesive and fundamentally American way of life where sport has long resonated for many as a great unifier. When athletes have more of a platform to engage with and confront these issues, attention to persisting inequalities and injustices rightfully overshadows rosy portraits of national bliss or naïve accounts of solidarity against a common enemy.

Before highlighting the ways that the ceremonial White House visit has transformed under the Trump administration, it is necessary to trace the evolution of this tradition in more detail. To that end, I provide a brief historical overview of notable presidential sports encomia that laid the groundwork for what would become a deeply entrenched and highly symbolic ritual at the intersection of sports and politics. I devote much greater attention to the Ronald Reagan administration, which converted the occasional invitation to championship-winning teams into an established and expected routine for sitting presidents.<sup>9</sup> I then focus on the subsequent tenures of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, each of whom borrowed from the familiar rhetorical strategies of their predecessors while adapting them to more personal philosophies and agendas. Finally, I delve into a case study that surveys the early years of the Trump presidency and the highly contested discourses involving teams and individual athletes that have agreed (and increasingly declined) to attend the White House. Drawing from newspapers,

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, “Richard Nixon, Sportswriter: The President, His Historical All-Star Baseball Team, and the Election of 1972,” *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 2 (1997): 192-202; Bonnie J. Sierlecki, “‘Grit and Graciousness’: Sport, Rhetoric, and Race in Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential Campaign,” In *Sports and Identity: New Agendas in Communication*, eds. Barry Brummett and Andrew W. Ishak, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 122-142.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Fleer, “The Church of Baseball and the US Presidency,” *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2007): 51-61.

<sup>8</sup> Michael David Hester, “America’s #1 Fan: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Presidential Sports Encomia and the Symbolic Power of Sports in the Articulation of Civil Religion in the United States,” PhD Dissertation, Georgia Tech University (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ken Belson, “At the White House, It Is Often Good Politics to Play Ball,” *The New York Times*, 4/24/2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/sports/baseball/25whitehouse.html>.

magazines, the Public Papers of the Presidents, and social media, which provides a more expansive platform for both presidents and athletes, I argue that the White House visit under President Trump constitutes a significant stage for discussing and often debating the role of sports in American culture as well as the meaning of America itself.

### Sports in the White House

Sports teams have visited the president's residence as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when Andrew Johnson invited two then-amateur baseball clubs, the Washington Nationals and Brooklyn Atlantics, to the executive mansion in 1865.<sup>10</sup> Four years later, Cincinnati-born Ulysses S. Grant welcomed baseball's first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings.<sup>11</sup> In the following decades, presidents made more of a habit out of turning up at sporting events, with Benjamin Harrison attending Senators games throughout the 1892 season and William Howard Taft becoming the first of many to throw a ceremonial first pitch in 1910.<sup>12</sup>

The tradition of bringing championship-winning teams to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue began with Calvin Coolidge, however, who met with the victorious Washington Senators in 1925.<sup>13</sup> The 30<sup>th</sup> President shook hands and posed for pictures with the capital city's home team, initiating some of the now-obligatory practices that accompany this staple of the president's public relations duties. The husband of a devoted baseball fan, Coolidge praised the Senators for their triumph in "one of the hardest-fought contests in all the history of the national game," emphasizing the importance of the game to the country at large and implicitly connecting its measures of success to ostensibly American values of hard work and determination.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the event foreshadowed much of the rhetoric that would pervade future instances of presidential sports encomia, with Coolidge reading a telegram from congressman John F. Miller of Seattle that informed the President, "It is your patriotic duty to call special session of Congress beginning Saturday October 4, so the members of Congress may have an opportunity to sneak out and see [Senators pitcher] Walter Johnson make baseball history."<sup>15</sup> Light-hearted banter alluding to the sports preferences of politicians would prove commonplace in the years to come, as would rhetorical linkages between the heroics of championship-winning teams and the political maneuverings of various administrations. Over the next century, White House visits evolved into a vital site for rearticulating and reconstituting a vision of the ideal American citizen and patriot.

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<sup>10</sup> Scott Allen, "The Traditional White House Visit Began with the 1924 Washington Senators," *The Washington Post*, 2/28/18, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2018/02/28/the-traditional-white-house-visit-began-with-the-washington-senators/?utm\\_term=.70dfbaa29e31](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2018/02/28/the-traditional-white-house-visit-began-with-the-washington-senators/?utm_term=.70dfbaa29e31); Gorman, "Athletes Who Skipped White House Visits," *Newsweek*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Fleer, "The Church of Baseball," 53.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, "The traditional White House visit," *The Washington Post*.

<sup>14</sup> William Bushong, "The First Fan: Mrs. Coolidge's Passion for the Game," *The White House Historical Association*, 7/2/2015, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-coolidges-and-baseball>; Allen, "The traditional White House visit," *The Washington Post*.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, "The Traditional White House Visit," *The Washington Post*.

### The Champion as American: The White House Visit Before Donald Trump

Despite Coolidge's example, the ceremonial White House visit remained only a sporadic occurrence through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of television in postwar America, however, galvanized further interest in the exploits of various athletes and teams. More than newspapers and radio ever could, the new mass medium brought spectator sports into the home with an unprecedented sense of immediacy. As narratives of athletic competition became more visible and widespread, politicians had more to gain from engaging with this aspect of popular culture, as well as the champions it produced. Hester contends that this strategy creates a "winner-by-association" effect that enables presidents to draw parallels between their own political victories and the conquests of successful sports teams.<sup>16</sup> The heightened visibility of sports and politics with the rise of television paved the way for more curated and calculated displays of sports encomia. In 1963, John F. Kennedy became the first president to invite the NBA champions to the White House when he hosted the Boston Celtics, and Jimmy Carter would follow suit as the first to welcome a Super Bowl champion when he celebrated the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1980.<sup>17</sup> Yet it was the president with a history in show business who would transform the event into a ritual and enshrine the rites and rhetoric associated with it.

In his remarks to visiting teams, Ronald Reagan institutionalized many of the rhetorical strategies that continue to define the tradition, often referencing his own history with sports, his status as a fan, and his responsibilities and accomplishments as president. Reagan occasionally reminded attendees of his time playing football at Eureka College or his experience as a radio sports announcer, and he rarely missed the opportunity to highlight his starring roles in sports films such as *Knute Rockne, All American* (1940), which earned him the enduring nickname "The Gipper" for his performance as Notre Dame football player George Gipp.<sup>18</sup> His tenure as a Hollywood leading man often informed his political persona, and his oration at sports encomia followed a similar pattern. Reagan joked with the 1985 NCAA men's basketball champions from Villanova that the team displayed "better shooting than I used to do in one of those western movies. You never ran out of ammunition, and you could always do retakes."<sup>19</sup> In his address to the 1985 Kansas City Royals, the President alluded to his portrayal of pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander in *The Winning Team*, noting, "I pitched in a World Series... it was the 1926 World Series, but I was doing it in 1952 in a movie."<sup>20</sup> These events allowed Reagan to further refine a public persona that effectively fused his popular culture credentials with his political agenda.

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<sup>16</sup> Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 266.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, "The Traditional White House Visit," *The Washington Post*.

<sup>18</sup> "Football & Presidents – From Teddy to Donald," *Sports History Weekly*, 11/13/16, <http://www.sportshistoryweekly.com/stories/football-presidents-from-teddy-to-donald,38>; Belson, "Good Politics to Play Ball," *The New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup> "Remarks Congratulating the Villanova University Wildcats on Winning the National Collegiate Athletic Association Basketball Championship," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 4/4/1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/40485a>.

<sup>20</sup> "Remarks Congratulating the Championship Kansas City Royals Following the World Series," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 10/31/1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/103185a>.

In adopting the language of sports and filtering it through his own history embodying athletes on the silver screen, Reagan perpetuated a rhetorical foundation for future White House visits of this nature, drawing parallels between sports and politics and linking the qualities most valued in sports to an apparently universal American experience. He told the defense of the 1985 San Francisco 49ers, "I have to go up on the Hill and deal with Congress in a few days -- how would you like to come back and I could use a front-line four?" and laughed with Coach Rollie Massimino of Villanova, "I can't be a fan of anyone. I just think of you all as constituents."<sup>21</sup> While such light-hearted banter rarely exposed the machinations of partisan politics, the rhetorical strategies selected for these events revealed overarching administrative approaches and philosophies. In his remarks to the Georgetown 1984 men's basketball team, Reagan mused, "I understand there's been some criticism, Coach [John] Thompson, that maybe your coaching was a little too stringent or almost military. I wouldn't let that bother me at all. It's results that pay off."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the 40<sup>th</sup> President peppered his statements with predictable appeals to hard work, grit, and determination, often casting these attributes as unique to a distinctly American way of life. Celebrating the 1983 Philadelphia 76ers, he proclaimed, "You were determined to be the best, and because of that, today you are. I can't think of a better example of the American dream come true."<sup>23</sup> International champions provided an especially useful opportunity for praising the American spirit against a vague and amorphous "other." In 1987, Reagan welcomed a victorious Olympic hockey team, anointing them as a "symbol of what might be called the corny, homegrown conviction that victory can come to those who live by the amateur spirit, who play fair and by the rules, that nice guys in a tough world can finish first."<sup>24</sup> While residual Cold War tensions certainly flavor this declaration, Reagan's investment in defining and differentiating the American ethos through sport would be adopted and strategically deployed by future presidents.

Like Reagan, George H. W. Bush was a college athlete and he even played in the inaugural College World Series as Yale's first baseman.<sup>25</sup> And following the lead of his predecessor, the 41<sup>st</sup> President frequently seized the ceremonial White House visit as an opportunity to ruminate on the virtues of the nation and its people. While Reagan praised the 1985 Lakers' commitment to fighting drug abuse as a demonstration of heroism on and off the court, so too did Bush Senior applaud the 1991 Pittsburgh Penguins (also the first Stanley Cup champs to receive a White House invite) for their dedication to greatness "on and

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<sup>21</sup> "Remarks of the President and Coach Bill Walsh of the Championship San Francisco 49'ers Following Super Bowl XIX," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 1/20/1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/103185a>; "Remarks Congratulating Villanova," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*.

<sup>22</sup> "Remarks on Meeting the Georgetown University Hoyas, the National Collegiate Athletic Association Basketball Champions," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 4/7/1984, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/40784b>.

<sup>23</sup> "Remarks on Greeting the Philadelphia 76'ers, the National Basketball Association World Champions," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 6/8/1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/60883c>.

<sup>24</sup> "Remarks to the United States Olympic Hockey Team," *Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 9/24/1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/092487f>.

<sup>25</sup> Ryan A. Swanson, "'I Was Never a Champion at Anything': Theodore Roosevelt's Complex and Contradictory Record as America's 'Sports President,'" *Journal of Sport History* 38, no. 3 (2011): 426.

off the ice” with their efforts to combat childhood cancer.<sup>26</sup> Subsequent administrations would emphasize athletes’ community service to an even greater degree, often suggesting that the very qualities that make for successful sports teams directly translate to those that motivate a good, law-abiding citizen.

George H. W. Bush was especially fond of wordplay that merged the parlance of sports culture with that of politics, describing the 1992 Washington Redskins as “the ‘National Defense’ that would make even the Pentagon proud” and deploying a similar turn of phrase when he declared that the 1991 women’s World Cup soccer champions “gave a new meaning to the term ‘U.S. defense.’”<sup>27</sup> His address to the venerated women’s team notably avoided any substantive commentary on the state of participation and opportunity for female athletes, instead resorting to platitudes about beating both the injuries and the odds, and offering a facetious jab to the under-performing men’s team: “For the sake of the male ego, I hope the men start catching up.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, Bush Senior paved the way for his successors by linking sports conquests to specific administrative accomplishments, jesting with the 1992 Washington Redskins and their Calgary-born quarterback Mark Rypien that “It looks like the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement is paying off already, at least from our standpoint.”<sup>29</sup> He resurrected the quip later that year when he welcomed the 1992 Toronto Blue Jays, teasing the mostly-American team that “our free trade agreement with Canada did not mean that the United States would trade away the world’s championship.”<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the encomia of the 41st President reveal an escalating performative dimension that connects topical sports narratives to policies both domestic and international, as well as more general appeals to American prosperity and dominance. As he informed the crowd attending the women’s World Cup celebration, “Americans are taking over.”<sup>31</sup>

Following in the tradition of his predecessors, Bill Clinton attempted to pepper his sports encomia with amusing parallels that compared the adversity overcome by championship-winning teams to the challenges faced by politicians. In his statement to the 1994 New York Rangers, he observed, “All of us here

<sup>26</sup> “Remarks to the Los Angeles Lakers, the National Basketball Association Champions,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 6/10/1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/61085b>; “Remarks Congratulating the National Hockey League Champion Pittsburgh Penguins,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1991, Book I)*, 6/24/1991, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1991-book1/html/PPP-1991-book1-doc-pg716-2.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> “Remarks Congratulating the 1992 Super Bowl Champion Washington Redskins,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1992, Book I)*, 4/22/1992, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1992-book1/html/PPP-1992-book1-doc-pg626.htm>; “Remarks Honoring the Women’s World Cup Soccer Champions,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1992, Book I)*, 1/23/1992, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1992-book1/html/PPP-1992-book1-doc-pg140.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> “Remarks Honoring the Women’s World Cup Soccer Champions,” 1992.

<sup>29</sup> “Remarks Congratulating the 1992 Super Bowl Champion Washington Redskins,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1992, Book I)*.

<sup>30</sup> “Remarks Honoring the World Series Champion Toronto Blue Jays,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1992-1993, Book II)*, 12/16/1992, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1992-book2/html/PPP-1992-book2-doc-pg2194-2.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> “Remarks Honoring the Women’s World Cup Soccer Champions,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1992, Book I)*.

in Washington can appreciate what goalies do because we have so many shots taken at us every day.”<sup>32</sup> Without an athletic background to summon anecdotally, Clinton relied on rhetorical connections between his experiences as president and the prevailing logics that undergird sports culture. In one of his recurring rhetorical frameworks, he told the 1994 NCAA men’s basketball champions from the University of Arkansas as well as the NBA’s Houston Rockets that same year, “Basketball is a lot like my work around here: You get behind; you get ahead; you never know whether you’re going to win until the end of the game.”<sup>33</sup> The 42<sup>nd</sup> President frequently used the stage of the ceremonial White House visit to speak about the merits of teamwork, emphasizing cooperation and collaboration not only as foundational tenets of the American way, but also aspirational virtues that citizens and lawmakers alike should strive towards in their daily lives. Hester notes that while “Reagan’s encomia describes an America that is already as good as it can be, ... the rhetoric by both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush is more demanding of the American people, referencing the need for further improvement.”<sup>34</sup> This is most evident in Clinton’s appeals to teamwork through quintessential sports narratives and ideologies. Celebrating the 1994 Rockets, he proclaimed, “You can’t win without great players, but you can’t win without good teamwork either. And that’s what our country needs more of.”<sup>35</sup> In his remarks to the 1999 Houston Comets, the first WNBA team to receive a White House invitation, the President implored people to “understand that they all do better when they help each other. And that’s the sort of spirit that we need more of... in running our communities and our Nation.”<sup>36</sup> Even more than his predecessors, Clinton accentuated the unifying capacity of sports not only as a representation of American culture, but also as a paragon for the country’s future. The developing trend towards accentuating a hypothetical America that *should be*, rather than celebrating an uncomplicated version of an America that *already is and always was*, set the stage for the highly divisive and contested political space that would emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and intensify under Donald Trump.

Clinton also notably highlighted sport’s potential to empower previously marginalized communities, articulating the pivotal role of athletics in advancing equality and empowering individuals. As the first President to welcome the national intercollegiate wheelchair champions to the White House, Clinton praised the 1993 University of Texas at Arlington’s Moving Mavs as “pioneers not only in wheelchair

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<sup>32</sup> “Remarks to the 1994 National Hockey League Champion New York Rangers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1995, Book I)*, 3/17/1995, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1995-book1/html/PPP-1995-book1-doc-pg370.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> “Remarks Congratulating the 1994 National Basketball Association Champion Houston Rockets and an Exchange With Reporters,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1995, Book I)*, 2/18/1995, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1995-book1/html/PPP-1995-book1-doc-pg224.htm>; “Remarks to the NCAA Basketball Champion University of Arkansas Razorbacks,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1994, Book I)*, 6/15/1994, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1994-book1/html/PPP-1994-book1-doc-pg1081.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Hester, “America’s #1 Fan,” 268.

<sup>35</sup> “Remarks Congratulating the 1994 National Basketball Association Champion Houston Rockets and an Exchange With Reporters,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1995, Book I)*.

<sup>36</sup> “Remarks to the 1999 Women’s National Basketball Association Champion Houston Comets,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: WILLIAM J. CLINTON (2000, Book I)*, 5/15/2000, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2000-book1/html/PPP-2000-book1-doc-pg934-2.htm>.

athletics but in the ongoing struggle in our Nation to obtain equal opportunities on and off the court for all Americans with disabilities, not inabilities.”<sup>37</sup> Clinton demonstrated the continuing evolution of the tradition from a passing public relations ploy to something more reminiscent of a State of the Union Address or a campaign speech, affirming, “I believe that when people are empowered and when they work together, when they’re given the opportunity to make something of themselves by a real community effort, that’s when we all achieve the fullest meaning in our lives.”<sup>38</sup> Boasting a less substantial sports background than prior presidents, Clinton occasionally cited his family’s fan allegiances, including his loyalty to Arkansan First Lady Hillary Clinton’s roots in Chicago, but having kids in sports enabled the President to inject a new degree of intimacy into the proceedings that would be carried on by his successors.<sup>39</sup> In a heartfelt address to the 1999 women’s World Cup champions, he added a personal dimension to his traditional empowerment rhetoric, applauding the impact of Title IX and admitting, “For the Clintons and the Gores, the proud parents of daughters, it is always a wonderful thing to see women finding new ways of expressing their God-given talents and abilities.”<sup>40</sup> While Clinton’s encomia largely focused on sport’s role in combatting economic, educational, and social problems within the country, his replacement’s would reinvigorate a vision of America informed primarily by international conflict.<sup>41</sup>

As Watterson points out, George W. Bush “used his highly visible position as managing partner of the Texas Rangers to catapult himself into Texas politics.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, the 43<sup>rd</sup> President frequently used his résumé in sports to establish a rapport with visiting teams and ruminate on the nature of leadership and success. While he often referred to his tenure with the underperforming Rangers in a self-deprecating manner, his insider knowledge of both sports and politics allowed him to demonstrate his uniquely qualified perspective in comparing the two.<sup>43</sup> Bush reveals an increasingly self-conscious approach to the ceremonial White House visit, even reflecting on the nature of the tradition and its role in the president’s public relations repertoire. For instance, in his remarks to the 2003 San Antonio Spurs he noted that the event “gives me a chance to talk about the development of a culture, a winning culture inside an organization. I like to call it a

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<sup>37</sup> “Remarks to the Champion University of Texas Wheelchair Basketball Team and an Exchange With Reporters,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1993, Book I)*, 5/13/1993, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1993-book1/html/PPP-1993-book1-doc-pg653.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “Remarks Congratulating the Super Bowl Champion Dallas Cowboys,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1993, Book I)*, 3/5/1993, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1993-book1/html/PPP-1993-book1-doc-pg246.htm>; “Remarks to the 1996 National Basketball Association Champion Chicago Bulls,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1997, Book I)*, 4/3/1997, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1997-book1/html/PPP-1997-book1-doc-pg380.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> “Remarks to the 1999 Women’s World Cup Champion United States Soccer Team,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: WILLIAM J. CLINTON (1999, Book II)*, 7/19/1999, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1999-book2/html/PPP-1999-book2-doc-pg1245.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> “Remarks to the NCAA Soccer Champion University of Virginia Cavaliers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1994, Book I)*, 2/25/1994, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1994-book1/html/PPP-1994-book1-doc-pg323.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, preface.

<sup>43</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2008 National Basketball Association Champion Boston Celtics,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2008, Book II)*, 1/19/2008, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2008-book2/html/PPP-2008-book2-doc-pg1214.htm>.

culture of service, people being willing to serve something greater than themselves [sic].”<sup>44</sup> Underscoring his position as a conduit between the world of sports and politics, and thus his status as an authority of each, Bush expressed in his comments to the 2002 New England Patriots, “That’s one of the things I try to explain to people in Washington, that we’re here to serve something greater than ourselves [sic].”<sup>45</sup>

Common rhetorical appeals to teamwork and self-sacrifice took on a markedly different tenor in the Bush administration, largely instigated by the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing War on Terror. Indeed, Bush consistently lauded the efforts of championship teams as a testament to American values and effectively mobilized these unifying characteristics against those of an essentialized enemy. While he thanked the 2001 Arizona Diamondbacks for giving “the American people a chance to think about something other than the war,” he confirmed that “our Nation is bound together for a common cause, and that’s to fight and win the war against terror.”<sup>46</sup> Clinton had paid increased attention to the community service endeavors of visiting athletes, but Bush escalated the practice even further to provide evidence of the fundamental kindness and generosity that defines the nation and to further justify its wars. In his address to the 2001 Los Angeles Lakers, he claimed, “You fight evil by doing something good... You fight evil by being an LA Laker that convinces somebody to be a mentor for some child in inner-city Los Angeles who wonders whether there’s any love or hope in the world.”<sup>47</sup> Bush was fond of variations of the phrase, “It’s more than just to be great players; it’s important to be good people, too,” a recurring sentiment that suggested a model for patriotism after 9/11.<sup>48</sup> As Michael Butterworth suggests, this model relied heavily on a simplistic and purportedly irrefutable distinction between good and evil that placed the law-abiding, sports-loving American citizen on one end of the spectrum and the malevolent and threatening terrorist on the other.<sup>49</sup> Such streamlined distortions ultimately served to constrain democratic discourse and dismiss opposing perspectives, simultaneously generating and articulating public support for the war effort through vague and innocuous anecdotes of athletic community service.

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<sup>44</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2003 National Basketball Association Champion San Antonio Spurs,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2003, Book II)*, 10/14/2003, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2003-book2/html/PPP-2003-book2-doc-pg1299.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2002 Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2002, Book I)*, 4/2/2002, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2002-book1/html/PPP-2002-book1-doc-pg533.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2001 World Series Champion Arizona Diamondbacks,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2001, Book II)*, 12/13/2001, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2001-book2/html/PPP-2001-book2-doc-pg1511.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2001 National Basketball Association Champion Los Angeles Lakers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2002, Book I)*, 1/28/2002, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2002-book1/html/PPP-2002-book1-doc-pg120.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2000 NCAA Women’s Volleyball Champion University of Nebraska Cornhuskers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: GEORGE W. BUSH (2001, Book I)*, May 31, 2001, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2001-book1/html/PPP-2001-book1-doc-pg601.htm>; “Remarks Honoring the 2001 World Series Champion Arizona Diamondbacks,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2001, Book II)*.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Butterworth, “Ritual in the ‘Church of Baseball’: Suppressing the Discourse of Democracy after 9/11,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005): 107-129.

The 43<sup>rd</sup> President pioneered the practice of welcoming multiple NCAA champions to the White House for a single celebration in 2002, emphasizing the athletes' responsibility as citizens and role models for the next generation. He contended, "You have a fantastic opportunity as champs to help define the character of America, to help say loud and clear that we will not tolerate evil."<sup>50</sup> Bush proved more deliberate than his predecessors in merging his political agenda with his remarks to visiting teams, exclaiming, "We've got a strong military here in America, and that's good. That's how we're going to make sure our homeland is secure... But we can all stand up in the face of this evil... by doing something good in our society."<sup>51</sup> More than any president before or after, Bush utilized the platform of the ceremonial White House visit as an opportunity to rearticulate a vision of America in direct opposition to an international foe that ranged from the perpetrators of 9/11 at the onset of the War in Afghanistan to a vaguely defined and broadly construed notion of global terrorism during the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In his remarks to the NCAA teams in 2002, he insisted that the enemy "didn't think we were a nation that could conceivably sacrifice for something greater than ourself [sic], that we were soft, that we were so self-absorbed and so materialistic that we wouldn't defend anything we believed in... They didn't understand America."<sup>52</sup> Particularly in the years following 9/11, Bush positioned athletes as representatives of a compassionate and selfless American ethos that the president strategically deployed to generate public support for the war effort, highlighting a broadly construed notion of service as the template for a model citizen-patriot and an inspiration for the next generation.<sup>53</sup> In his remarks to the 2002 Winter Olympic and Paralympic athletes, he lauded the "uniquely American" character of the team, exclaiming "We had firefighters on our team; we had members of the Armed Services; we've got community volunteers. And your commitment to your communities will serve you well as champions."<sup>54</sup> Conflating voluntarism, service, and victory served to simplify and homogenize a vision of American-ness that capitalized on tragedy and mobilized the raw emotions of the moment. This strategy proved crucial in grafting public support for the War in Afghanistan to more dubious endeavors in Iraq.

As the first African American elected President of the United States, Barack Obama needed to negotiate and perform his relationship to sports in different ways than his predecessors. Mary G. McDonald and Samantha King argue, "Obama's athletic activities became key vehicles for reading his body and by extension his identity and his politics," illuminating "long-standing tensions in America's affective relation to black male athletes."<sup>55</sup> By articulating his extensive knowledge and love of basketball, Sierlecki adds,

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<sup>50</sup> "Remarks Honoring NCAA Champion Teams," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2002, Book I)*, 3/12/2002, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2002-book1/html/PPP-2002-book1-doc-pg387.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "Remarks Honoring the University of Texas at Austin 2005 NCAA Football Champions," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2006, Book I)*, 2/14/2006, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2006-book1/html/PPP-2006-book1-doc-pg235.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> "Olympians at the White House: Historical Highlights." *The White House Historical Association*, 4/26/2018, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/press-room/press-releases/olympians-at-the-white-house-historical-highlights>.

<sup>55</sup> Mary G. McDonald and Samantha King, "A Different Contender? Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Campaign and the Racial Politics of Sport," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 6 (2012): 1023.

“Obama could illustrate his ‘street’ roots while also distancing himself from depictions of black males, and particularly black athletes, as too flashy, aggressive, angry, and selfish.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Obama used his affinity for sports to challenge and subvert assumptions about black males while simultaneously building his brand as a “hip, youthful, urban candidate” throughout the 2008 campaign.<sup>57</sup> Once in office, the 44<sup>th</sup> President adopted many of the rhetorical conventions refined in previous sports encomia, including encouraging Los Angeles Lakers Coach Phil Jackson to “bring some books for Republicans and Democrats in Congress... to get them to start playing like a team together.”<sup>58</sup> While he reliably meditated on qualities of leadership and teamwork, and offered the obligatory and loosely drawn parallels between sports and government, Obama also exercised his authority as president to satisfy his own fan allegiances. An avid supporter of Chicago sports teams, he invited the 1986 Bears to the White House for a much-belated celebration of their Super Bowl victory, effectively making up for their initial visit’s cancelation following the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion.<sup>59</sup> A pronounced White Sox fan, President Obama also welcomed his cross-town rivals, the 2016 Chicago Cubs, to move up their scheduled meeting with incoming President Trump to visit Obama in the final days of his presidency.<sup>60</sup>

Like his predecessor, the 44<sup>th</sup> President highlighted the community service accomplishments of visiting teams; but instead of framing these endeavors as fundamental to American success in international conflicts, Obama underscored their importance in improving relationships and opportunities on American soil. This approach reflects an overall platform built not only on ending the wars of the previous administration, but also faced with addressing domestic issues, such as the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the resulting recession. Obama’s presidential encomia thus reflect a political agenda organized around the reform of health care, education, and the prison system, as well as a heavy investment in public works projects. For instance, he extolled the virtues of the 2008 WNBA champions Detroit Shock, observing, “They’ve given free tickets to underprivileged youth, mentored abused women and children, donated backpacks filled with school supplies to foster kids, restored a rundown library into a safe, clean place for kids to play and to grow.”<sup>61</sup> He also praised The University of Alabama’s victorious football team, mentioning that the 2009 champions “met with a group of kids from one of DC’s roughest neighborhoods and helped teach them about the importance of staying in school and making healthy choices. That’s how

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<sup>56</sup> Sierlecki, “‘Grit and Graciousness,’” 107.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2009 National Basketball Association Champion Los Angeles Lakers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2010, Book 1)*, 1/25/2010, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2010-book1/xml/PPP-2010-book1-Doc-pg72.xml>.

<sup>59</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 1986 Super Bowl Champion Chicago Bears,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2011, Book 2)*, 10/7/2011, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2011-book2/xml/PPP-2011-book2-Doc-pg1234.xml>.

<sup>60</sup> Michele Gorman, “Tom Brady, Michael Jordan Among Pro Athletes Who Skipped Team White House Visits,” *Newsweek*, 2/12/17, <http://www.newsweek.com/athletes-who-skipped-white-house-visits-555241>

<sup>61</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2008 Women’s National Basketball Association Champion Detroit Shock,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2009, Book 2)*, 7/27/2009, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2009-book2/xml/PPP-2009-book2-Doc-pg1180.xml>.

champions act, in football and in life.”<sup>62</sup> Obama’s sports encomia notably diverge from essentialist notions of overarching and universal American values, instead focusing on the everyday acts of charity and generosity performed for communities in need. In 2010, the President strayed from the traditional script of the White House visit, inviting the NBA champion Lakers to the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus to work directly with the Boys and Girls Club, “assembling care packages for our wounded warriors [and] putting together some toiletry kits for the homeless here in Washington, DC.”<sup>63</sup> Community service proved the most common theme of Obama’s sports encomia, but with a decidedly domestic thrust and practical application that distanced these events from the rhetoric of the previous administration.

Like Clinton, Obama often applauded the advancements made in women’s sports and expressed his profound gratitude for the female athletes who pave the way for gender parity and set a positive example for the youth. As a father of two daughters, Obama frequently referenced his children’s involvement in sport and the constant source of hope and inspiration that female athletes provide for his family. Addressing the 2008 Shock, he mused, “it’s hard to believe the WNBA has already been around for 12 years, and that means that my daughters have never known a time when women couldn’t play professional sports.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in his remarks to Baylor’s 2012 women’s basketball team, he proclaimed, “as the father of two daughters who are tall and beautiful just like them, it is great to have role models who can show that women can be strong and athletic and competitive, but also play as a team.”<sup>65</sup> Despite Obama’s progressive sentiments, his comments reveal the lingering tendency to imagine the female athlete through a lens of inherent difference that is often articulated to physical appearance. While male athleticism is taken for granted as common sense, women are compelled to carry the burden of proof and “show” that they can be strong, athletic, and competitive while still retaining a traditional and conventionally “beautiful” femininity that has proven more conducive to media exposure and sponsorships. As Cheryl Cole theorizes, the rise of a “new feminine aesthetic—versatile, athletic, hard, and slick” ultimately re-inscribes the successful sportswoman as a commodity in which “identities, exchange value, and self-worth are embedded in body management.”<sup>66</sup> Through this process, ostensibly empowering discourses ultimately serve to control the female body by normalizing and celebrating a physique that notably never strays too far from patriarchal interests and values.

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<sup>62</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2009 NCAA Football Champion University of Alabama Crimson Tide,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2010, Book 1)*, 3/8/2010, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2010-book1/xml/PPP-2010-book1-Doc-pg333.xml>.

<sup>63</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2010 National Basketball Association Champion Los Angeles Lakers,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2010, Book 2)*, 12/13/2010, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2010-book2/xml/PPP-2010-book2-Doc-pg1915.xml>.

<sup>64</sup> “Remarks Honoring the 2008 Women’s National Basketball Association Champion Detroit Shock,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2009, Book 2)*.

<sup>65</sup> “Remarks Honoring the NCAA Women’s Basketball Champion Baylor University Lady Bears,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2012, Book 2)*, 7/18/2012, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2012-book2/xml/PPP-2012-book2-doc-pg1049.xml>.

<sup>66</sup> Cheryl L. Cole, “Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body,” in *Women, Sport, and Culture*, edited by Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), 16.

Those that deviate from these hegemonic structures frequently invite a “climate of suspicion” that questions the athlete’s “compulsory heterosexuality” or assumes some sort of “gender deviance” that may result in “bodily/biological examination, and bodily probes and invasions.”<sup>67</sup>

Obama’s statement to 2009’s Sky Blue FC, the first champions of the Women’s Professional Soccer League, further demonstrates the persisting gap in recognition and perceived legitimacy between men’s and women’s sports: “The women on this team aren’t playing for fame or fortune,” he averred, “They are spending countless hours in the gym and on the practice field because they recognize a rare opportunity to do the thing that they love.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Obama’s remarks elide the significant wage discrepancies for female athletes, emphasizing their passion and perseverance without initiating a dialogue about gender inequality in sport or venturing a solution to these issues. Denied equivalent opportunities for training, development, compensation, and media coverage, female athletes face a plethora of structural disadvantages that rarely receive any mention in these visits.<sup>69</sup> Instead, women are celebrated for overcoming a relatively vague and unspecified series of obstacles that are rhetorically relegated to a murky past of discrimination and injustice that has since been solved and eradicated. While gender disparity in sport remains a glaring problem that has not yet been meaningfully addressed during these ceremonies, Obama did welcome more women’s teams to the White House than any of his predecessors. The overarching rhetorical strategies at Obama’s sports encomia largely reflect his progressive politics, as well as his commitment to social justice issues. He celebrates the good deeds performed by athletes in their communities without always explicitly linking them to an overarching American value system or patriotic code, but the unifying potential of sport and nation continue to resonate in his approach.

Diverse political climates and agendas notwithstanding, the presidencies from Reagan to Obama shared a common trend towards unifying discourse that characterized the ceremonial White House visits of championship teams. In the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these events rarely amounted to more than shallow pageantry, with the complexities of partisan politics reduced to a friendly rivalry between opposing teams who ultimately shared the same passion and a common goal of a healthy and cohesive America. However, the new millennium ushered in an evolution of the ritual from a public relations ploy to a highly compelling and contested political theater. W. Bush utilized these celebrations to rearticulate a sense of unity in the wake of national tragedy, a project that would prove increasingly difficult to sustain as public support for the War on Terror wavered. Having grappled with the same forms of everyday racism experienced by many visiting athletes, Obama not only adopted unifying rhetoric, but also attempted to energize these events by bringing athletes to underserved communities.

Coinciding with the rise of social media and the concurrent ability of athletes to shape their own narratives outside of the confines of sports media, the Obama administration saw the beginnings of explicitly political decisions to skip the White House visit. While not remotely approaching the frequency of these

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 19-21.

<sup>68</sup> “Remarks Honoring the Women’s Professional Soccer Champion Sky Blue FC,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama (2010, Book 2)*, 7/1/2010, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-2010-book2/xml/PPP-2010-book2-Doc-pg1007.xml>.

<sup>69</sup> Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Michela Musto, “‘It’s Dude Time!’: A Quarter Century of Excluding Women’s Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows,” *Communication and Sport* 3, no. 3 (2015): 261-287.

instances during the subsequent presidency, these early cases point to the divisions and ruptures that would define the ceremonies under Trump, as well as the increased surge of athletic agency accompanying this development. With few exceptions, the ritual before Trump represented a largely top-down affair, with the president musing about the meaning of sport, nation, triumph, and teamwork, and the athletes serving mostly as decoration. Occasionally, the microphone would find its way to a star athlete or coach for a quote, but the proceedings mostly resembled a campaign stunt, surrounding the president with a bevy of “winners” symbolically lending further legitimacy to the country’s ultimate authority.

Since Trump took office, this de facto contract has been challenged by athletes and the president alike. Championship-winning teams have failed to receive invites in the past, typically during tumultuous periods when their victories were understandably overshadowed by events of greater national consequence. For instance, the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle sidelined an invitation to the 1985 Chicago Bears, while the 1991 New York Giants were eclipsed by the onset of the Gulf War, the 1999 Denver Broncos by Clinton’s impeachment, the 2000 St. Louis Rams by peace negotiations in the Middle East, and the 2003 Tampa Bay Buccaneers by the invasion of Iraq.<sup>70</sup> However, the prevalence of disinvitations and no-shows under President Trump, as well as the rhetoric deployed during the White House visits that have taken place as scheduled, reflects a significant turn towards divisive discourses that represent a dramatic shift in the nature of these events. No longer a top-down celebration of a united front with the president positioned as moral bellwether, the ceremonial White House visit has become a microcosm of a precarious political climate and a stage for a more empowered athlete-activist.

### **The Champion as Partisan: The White House Visit under Donald Trump**

A case study of Donald Trump’s early years as President of the United States reveals a strikingly disparate sociocultural climate for sports encomia and illuminates the evolution of the tradition from a predictable public relations routine to a disruptive political statement. Athletes have seized their platform to address societal ills and federal malpractice in the past, with high-profile athletes adding their voices and actions to anti-war protests as well as the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, but the scale of athletic engagement in issues of social and political import has intensified under the Trump administration.<sup>71</sup> Armed with a social media presence that defies the top-down structures of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media institutions, athletes feel increasingly equipped and empowered to speak their minds. Yet the affordances of social media technologies are available to politicians as well, and the 45<sup>th</sup> President’s affinity for Twitter has raised questions about the role and responsibility of the athlete as an entertainer, employee, citizen, and activist.

The ceremonial White House visit has proven a hotbed for these discourses in recent years, frequently circling around issues of racial inequality and injustice. When then-San Francisco 49ers

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<sup>70</sup> Jerry Bemby, “Athletes Passing on Visiting the White House is Nothing New,” *The Undeclared*, 2/6/2018, <https://theundefeated.com/features/athletes-passing-on-visiting-the-white-house-is-nothing-new-philadelphia-eagles/>.

<sup>71</sup> Harry Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, (New York: Free Press, 1970); Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women’s Sports*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans, as well as the failures of the justice system in punishing those responsible, he instigated a firestorm of debates about the meaning of respect, honor, and patriotic duty.<sup>72</sup> A former investor in the ill-fated United States Football League, Trump sided with ownership when he emphatically tweeted, “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL... he or she should not be allowed to disrespect... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED.”<sup>73</sup> During a 2017 rally in Alabama, Trump added, “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!’”<sup>74</sup> Borrowing from his iconic catchphrase as the former host of the reality television series *The Apprentice*, Trump’s self-reflexive allusions to his history in show business are reminiscent of Reagan’s, further highlighting the increasingly performative dimensions of a hyper-mediated presidency. Moreover, the perception that Trump has not only ignored the plight of minorities but also emboldened forces of hate and bigotry throughout the country has prompted athletes, and especially African-American athletes, to take action.<sup>75</sup>

In the case of the ceremonial White House visit, the most visible and noteworthy actions have involved not showing up at all. These circumstances are not entirely unique to the Trump presidency. Indeed, the famously introverted Larry Bird said of Reagan, “If the president wants to see me, he knows where to find me,” and Steelers linebacker James Harrison skipped meetings with Bush Senior as well as Obama, explaining, “I don’t feel like it’s that big a deal to me.”<sup>76</sup> Michael Jordan also opted to spend time with his family instead of visiting H. W. Bush, but such absences typically lacked explicit political motives.<sup>77</sup> This began to change under Obama, when Bruins goaltender Tim Thomas objected in a Facebook post, “I believe the Federal government has grown out of control, threatening the Rights, Liberties, and Property of the People.”<sup>78</sup> While the goalie refused to associate his allegations with a particular political party or administration, Ravens Center Matt Birk offered a more partisan justification for his absence, citing Obama’s support for Planned Parenthood as a deterrent that he could not overcome in good conscience: “I am active in the pro-life movement,” he maintained, “and I just felt like I couldn’t deal with that. I couldn’t endorse

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<sup>72</sup> Tom Krasovic, “Colin Kaepernick Takes a Knee During the National Anthem and Is Boored,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9/1/16, <http://www.latimes.com/sports/nfl/la-sp-chargers-kaepernick-20160901-snap-story.html>.

<sup>73</sup> “Football & Presidents – From Teddy to Donald,” *Sports History Weekly*; Nicole Lewis, “The NFL and the First Amendment: A Guide to the Debate,” *The Washington Post*, 10/5/2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/05/the-nfl-and-the-first-amendment-a-guide-to-the-debate/?utm\\_term=.e8aca0f8b060](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/05/the-nfl-and-the-first-amendment-a-guide-to-the-debate/?utm_term=.e8aca0f8b060).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Dan Merica, “Trump Condemns ‘Hatred, Bigotry and Violence on Many Sides’ in Charlottesville,” *CNN.com*, 8/13/17, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-statement-alt-right-protests/index.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Gorman, “Athletes Who Skipped White House Visits,” *Newsweek*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Neumann, “Why White House Visits by Champions are a U.S. Tradition,” *ESPN.com*, 3/1/16, [http://www.espn.com/college-football/story/\\_/id/14870667/how-white-house-visits-championship-teams-became-american-tradition](http://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/14870667/how-white-house-visits-championship-teams-became-american-tradition).

that in any way.”<sup>79</sup> When Obama belatedly welcomed the 1972 Miami Dolphins, Jim Langer, Bob Keuchenberg, and Manny Fernandez all declined their invitations. Fernandez noted, “I’ll just say my views are diametrically opposed to the president’s” and Langer agreed, “We’ve got some real moral compass issues in Washington.”<sup>80</sup> The day after Trump won the election, Cubs pitcher Jake Arrieta tweeted, “Time for Hollywood to pony up and head for the border,” indicating his support for the incoming president and neglecting to attend his team’s visit in the final days of Obama’s presidency.<sup>81</sup> While such deliberate instances emerged with Obama’s sports encomia, they have achieved a new level of scrutiny and significance under Trump.

Whether teams will attend the White House or not has proven a topic of national interest and debate, challenging traditional narratives about the role of sports (and sports figures) in American culture and disrupting the familiar unifying rhetoric that serves to position the nation as morally cohesive and superior. Trump’s rhetoric during the events that have mostly gone as planned, with athletes dutifully attending and going through the prescribed motions, reflects the divisive and hostile transfer of power that defined the 2016 election. The 45<sup>th</sup> President has recycled tried-and-true tropes that link the politician’s experience to that of the athlete’s, praising the 2017 New England Patriots for their unlikely come-from-behind Super Bowl victory “and the pundits — good old pundits, boy, they’re wrong a lot, aren’t they? — saying you couldn’t do it.”<sup>82</sup> He further averred, “Whether you’re trying to win a Super Bowl or rebuild our country, as Coach [Bill] Belichick would say, ‘There are no days off.’”<sup>83</sup> Trump has used his presidential sports encomia to further distance himself from the previous administration and convince the populace of his success and popularity. In his address to the 2016 Chicago Cubs, who had visited Obama before his exit, Trump declared, “They were actually here, but they wanted to be here with Trump.”<sup>84</sup> Welcoming the perennially dominant Alabama football team in 2018, he told Coach Nick Saban, “You’ve been here six times, and this is your first time in the Oval... They didn’t invite you. Trump invites you.”<sup>85</sup> The use of the third person in these remarks highlights an increasingly self-conscious and self-congratulatory tone that belies the many controversies that now accompany these events.

Yet his rhetorical strategies implicitly acknowledge and discipline the athletes that have not been so cooperative, thereby reaffirming and perpetuating the racial tensions that have permeated recent White House visits. For instance, Trump’s statement to the 2017 Pittsburgh Penguins reconstituted many of the

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<sup>79</sup> Gorman, “Athletes Who Skipped White House Visits,” *Newsweek*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Victor Mather, “Tom Brady Skips Patriots’ White House Visit Along with Numerous Teammates,” *The New York Times*, 4/19/17, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/sports/-new-england-patriots-visit-white-house-donald-trump.html>.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Michael A. Memoli, “Cubs Visit President Trump at White House: ‘This is a Great Team,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 6/28/17, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-cubs-donald-trump-white-house-20170628-story.html>.

<sup>85</sup> David Nakamura and Cindy Boren, “‘Roll Tide’: Alabama Football Team Visits Trump at the White House,” 4/10/2018, *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/04/10/watch-live-alabama-visits-trump-at-the-white-house/?utm\\_term=.8fa53da80278](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/04/10/watch-live-alabama-visits-trump-at-the-white-house/?utm_term=.8fa53da80278).

assumptions and expectations surrounding athletes in a highly contested moment for athlete activism and engagement. The President proclaimed that the team of 19, all white with only seven players born in the United States, “were true champions and incredible patriots,” reinforcing the dubious racial politics that have informed Trump’s attitudes toward immigration.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, his joke that “I actually don’t like standing in front of them... We always like unattractive teams, right?”<sup>87</sup> is difficult to separate from the exclusive whiteness of the group, especially in contrast to the more diverse teams that typically visit the White House. In fact, the racial homogeneity of the NHL and its fans makes the death threats to African American Lightning forward J.T. Brown, the first professional hockey player to join in the current wave of protests, all the more disturbing.<sup>88</sup> Despite such troubling circumstances, Trump’s message to the Penguins echoes his sentiments to the rest of the athletic community, effectively instructing them to stick to sports and leave the welfare of the American people to those in power. Most revealing is Trump’s assertion that “these men don’t want to be politicians. They shouldn’t be. Don’t be a politician.”<sup>89</sup> While the President did not explicitly reference the protests by Kaepernick and his colleagues, Trump’s encomia reconstitute the perception that an athlete’s proper place in society should be confined to the proverbial field of play.

Comments from athletes, coaches, management, and ownership that supported their team’s attendance convey a general reluctance to sully a once-proud tradition, as well as the lingering impulse to remove politics from the equation. Before the 2018 College Football Playoffs, CREDO Action implored Alabama Coach Nick Saban to “Take a stand against Donald Trump’s racism.” The petition from the social change organization read: “Disavow [Trump’s] hateful critique of NFL protesters who are speaking out against systemic racism and police brutality. Affirm your players’ right to protest and pledge not to take your team to the White House.”<sup>90</sup> Saban deflected, conceding, “I don’t keep up with that stuff as much as everybody else does” and mourned the ‘good old days’ when White House visits represented “unifying events” for the country.<sup>91</sup> It is noteworthy that these events were ostensibly at their most “unifying” when athletes had less of a platform to engage with politics in a meaningful way, especially when the source of these comments gets paid handsomely to coach unpaid athletes and enjoys the privilege of staying out of politics more so than the precarious labor of his players. Notably, Saban’s players suggested that their coach never offered them an option to skip the ceremony. Offensive lineman Ross Pierschbacher explained that Saban decided, “‘We’re doing this regardless of your political thoughts. We’re going, just to celebrate this

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<sup>86</sup> Alex Prewitt, “Penguins, Trump Stick to Script in White House,” *Sports Illustrated*, 10/10/2017, <https://www.si.com/nhl/2017/10/10/pittsburgh-penguins-white-house-visit-trump>.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Duane Rankin, “National Champion Alabama to Visit White House, Trump,” *Montgomery Adviser*, 4/9/18, <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/sports/college/alabama/2018/04/09/national-champions-alabama-visit-white-house-trump-tuesday/501590002/>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

team. It's an honor. And just to be able to say that you've gone to the White House is something that you can cherish forever."<sup>92</sup>

The 2017 Houston Astros' team president of business operations Reid Ryan adopted a similar perspective, confirming that the event "is a tradition and an honor... When the White House calls and invites you to come up, it's something that as an organization we felt both a responsibility and an obligation to be part of."<sup>93</sup> Penguins Coach Mike Sullivan also attempted to emphasize the celebratory roots of the tradition and distance his teams' attendance from the contested political climate pervading sports in the Trump administration. "Nobody's choosing a side," he insisted. "Nobody's taking a stand. We're simply honoring our champions and the accomplishments of this group of players."<sup>94</sup> Many in the sports world were quick to condemn the Penguins' decision, accusing "the current standard-bearer of a lily-white professional sports league" of ignoring the plight of more racialized leagues and problematically exercising their privilege in depoliticizing the significance of their attendance.<sup>95</sup> As players of color find it increasingly difficult to stay out of politics and dismiss the president's thinly veiled race-baiting, the lack of solidarity demonstrated by a white team in an overwhelmingly white league exacerbated the racial contours underpinning these events. Despite the thorny terrain that accepting a White House invite represents, many athletes have articulated their gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity, reveling in the chance to participate in a ceremony so steeped in American sports history.<sup>96</sup> Members of the 2017 South Carolina women's basketball team expressed considerable excitement about the prospect of getting an invitation, with A'ja Wilson calling it a "once-in-a-lifetime thing" and Coach Dawn Staley concluding, "It's what it stands for. It's what national champions do."<sup>97</sup> Despite their willingness to honor the rites and rituals of the ceremonial White House visit, they did not receive an invitation for several months and eventually declined due to a scheduling conflict.<sup>98</sup> The delay speaks to the continued hierarchies of value and attention bestowed on men and women's sports as well as the President's own fraught relationship to issues of gender inequality.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> David Nakamura and Cindy Boren, "'Roll Tide,'" *The Washington Post*.

<sup>93</sup> Jake Kaplan, "Astros Invited to the White House, to be Honored by Donald Trump," *Houston Chronicle*, 1/3/2018, <https://www.chron.com/sports/astros/article/Astros-invited-to-White-House-to-be-honored-by-12470990.php>.

<sup>94</sup> Alex Prewitt, "Penguins, Trump Stick to Script in White House," *Sports Illustrated*.

<sup>95</sup> Greg Wyshynski, "Penguins Were Wrong to Accept Trump's Invitation with Feeble Statement," *Yahoo Sports*, 9/24/2017, <https://sports.yahoo.com/penguins-wrong-accept-trumps-invitation-feeble-statement-164255570.html>.

<sup>96</sup> David Nakamura and Cindy Boren, "'Roll Tide,'" *The Washington Post*.

<sup>97</sup> Carron J. Phillips, "Lynx vs. Sparks WNBA Finals a Reminder of Their Respective Greatness and Shared Fight Against Social Injustice," *NY Daily News*, 10/5/2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/basketball/lynx-sparks-reminder-greatness-fight-injustice-article-1.3542084>.

<sup>98</sup> Khadrice Rollins, "South Carolina Will Not Attend White House NCAA Champions Day Due to Scheduling Conflict," 11/16/17, <https://www.si.com/college-basketball/2017/11/16/south-carolina-will-skip-white-house-visit-ncaa-champions-day>.

<sup>99</sup> "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," *The New York Times*, 10/7/16, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>; "Stormy Daniels Describes Her Alleged Affair with Donald Trump," *60 Minutes*, 3/28/18, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stormy-daniels-describes-her-alleged-affair-with-donald-trump-60-minutes-interview/>.

While the tradition's association with commonsense notions of honor, obligation, and patriotic duty remains strong, such concepts have proven increasingly open to interpretation and susceptible to debate in this transformative moment for athlete activism. Athletes have declined their White House invitations in previous presidencies, but the necessity to articulate and defend these actions has escalated significantly. In celebrating their 2017 Super Bowl victory, Patriots' owner Robert Kraft observed, "Every time we've had the privilege of going to the White House, a dozen of our players don't go. This is the first time it's gotten any media attention."<sup>100</sup> Stacey James, a spokesman for the organization, attributed the absences to the fact that many of the veteran players had already visited the White House in recent memory. Moreover, convicted murderer and former Patriot Aaron Hernandez had hanged himself in prison the day before the event, casting a shadow over the proceedings largely unrelated to party or politics.<sup>101</sup> The fact that representatives of the franchise felt compelled to justify the teams' attendance illuminates the tensions and anxieties that now accompany a once-routine procedure. While Brady again skipped the ceremony for family reasons, a picture of Trump's trademark "Make America Great Again" hat in the quarterback's locker had circulated throughout the Internet, indicating his apparent support for the President. Combined with Robert Kraft's \$1 million contribution to the inauguration festivities and an apparent letter of congratulations from Coach Bill Belichick, some of the most prominent figures in the Patriots organization have been coded as conservative and decidedly pro-Trump.<sup>102</sup> Yet the comments made by players who refused to attend highlight the 45<sup>th</sup> president's thorny track record with race relations, and particularly with black athletes. Running back LaGarrette Blount claimed, "I just don't feel welcome into that house." Safety Devin McCourty agreed saying "I don't feel accepted."<sup>103</sup> Tight end Martellus Bennett, who has vocally supported Kaepernick and participated in demonstrations during the National Anthem, told reporters, "It is what it is. People know how I feel about it. Just follow me on Twitter."<sup>104</sup> The disparate reactions by members of the Patriots organization challenge the unifying rhetoric that typically defined these events, while Bennett's reference to his social media account suggests athletes' increased ability to develop and curate their own brand and to make their voices heard beyond top-down organizational structures.

A growing awareness of the scope and significance of this platform has enabled athletes to advance unifying rhetoric and activities *in spite of* the current administration, an emerging trend that subverts the authority of the president to guide and interpret the role of sports in American culture. When discussing the prospect of returning to the White House if the 2017 Cleveland Cavaliers were to repeat as NBA champions, LeBron James submitted, "We all have to do our part. Our nation has never been built on one guy, anyway. It's been built on... multiple people having a dream and making it become a reality by giving back to the community."<sup>105</sup> While previous administrations alluded to teams' community service as evidence

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<sup>100</sup> Victor Mather, "Tom Brady Skips Patriots' White House Visit," *The New York Times*.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Jason Lloyd, "LeBron James Won't Commit to Future White House Visit under Trump Administration," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11/11/2016, <https://www.ohio.com/akron/pages/lebron-james-won-t-commit-to-future-white-house-visit-under-trump-administration>.

of an American ideal implicitly shepherd and sanctioned by the president himself, new demonstrations of community engagement have been mobilized in opposition to President Trump's rhetoric and policies. Athletes have felt increasingly empowered and often obligated to speak out against the administration's divisive and derogatory discourses. Ruminating the possibility of a visit to the White House, Rebekkah Brunson of the 2017 Minnesota Lynx contended, "I don't think [Trump] stands for things we represent as an organization."<sup>106</sup> Predicting that many of the 2018 champion Philadelphia Eagles would decline a visit, receiver Torrey Smith opined, "I don't think [Trump] is a good person," citing behavior he and his teammates have perceived as sexist, misogynistic, and offensive to minorities.<sup>107</sup> Increasingly finding themselves in the crosshairs of a presidential speech or tweet, athletes have defended their right to voice a political opinion and contribute to the national discourse in a particularly contentious cultural moment.

Refusing to diminish their role in society to their performance on the field, players have used their stage to address issues of both personal and political importance. For example, Puerto Rican baseball players Carlos Correa and Carlos Beltran took the 2017 Houston Astros' White House visit as an opportunity to draw attention to the needs of their home territory in the aftermath of the devastating Hurricanes Irma and Maria. While Beltran maintained that his decision not to attend was not politically motivated, he admitted that he was disappointed in the government's response to the disaster. "Being part of the United States," he determined, "you expect to at least get the same benefits when tragedies like this happen. The fact that we haven't [gotten] those, yeah, it's a disappointment."<sup>108</sup> One of the pioneers of the recent NFL protests, Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins explicitly articulated the movement's goals: "I want to see changes in our criminal justice system. I want to see... economical and educational advancement in communities of color... and I want to see our relationships between our communities and our law enforcement be advanced."<sup>109</sup> Jenkins' comments reflect a progressive and unifying sensibility not altogether unheard of in the history of presidential sports encomia, but notably stemming from the athlete and in marked contrast to the rhetorical patterns of President Trump. While some from the ownership and management perspective have attempted to maintain the tradition's celebratory roots and distance the event from the political strife of the moment, front office representatives are beginning to stand behind their players' decisions with greater commitment and vigor. Eagles Chairman and CEO Jeff Lurie praised the team for taking "their courage, character and commitment into our communities to make them better or to call attention to injustice," proclaiming, "We at the Philadelphia Eagles firmly believe that in this difficult time of division and conflict, it is more important than ever for football to be a great unifier."<sup>110</sup> While sports have been strategically activated as

<sup>106</sup> Rene' Kennedy, "WNBA Champ: No to Trump, White House Visit, Yes to 'Ellen' Show," *swishapped.com*, 10/7/17, <https://www.swishapped.com/2017/10/7/16440418/minnesota-brunson-ellen-degeneres-no-white-house-trump-wnba>.

<sup>107</sup> Jacob Bogue, "'Plenty' of Eagles Won't Visit the White House, Torrey Smith Says," *The Washington Post*, 2/8/18, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/02/08/plenty-of-eagles-wont-visit-the-white-house-torrey-smith-says/?utm\\_term=.853da9e34e6c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/02/08/plenty-of-eagles-wont-visit-the-white-house-torrey-smith-says/?utm_term=.853da9e34e6c).

<sup>108</sup> Matt Young, "Carlos Beltran to Skip Astros' White House Visit," *Houston Chronicle*, 2/7/18, <https://www.chron.com/sports/astros/article/Astros-Carlos-Beltran-skip-White-House-visit-Trump-12558683.php>.

<sup>109</sup> Jacob Bogue, "'Plenty' of Eagles Won't Visit the White House," *The Washington Post*.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

unifying forces for generations, the role of sports and athletes in bringing people together *despite* the efforts of the president represents a new development.

No team has contributed to the developing narrative of Trump’s sports encomia and the evolving meaning of the tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than the Golden State Warriors. Even before Trump took office, NBA players had begun to use their platform to protest issues of racial inequality and injustice.<sup>111</sup> Yet Trump’s election prompted a new phase of athlete activism in a primarily African American league that has vocally and repeatedly taken issue with Trump’s racially charged rhetoric.<sup>112</sup> After winning the 2017 NBA Finals, Stephen Curry announced that he would not visit the White House, hoping that his defiance would demonstrate his offense to “the things [Trump has] said and the things that he hasn’t said at the right times.”<sup>113</sup> “By acting and not going,” Curry explained, “hopefully that will inspire some change when it comes to what we tolerate in this country, what is accepted and what we turn a blind eye toward.”<sup>114</sup> Finals MVP Kevin Durant concurred, arguing that the nation under Trump “has been so divided” and positing that “For us to move forward, we need more athletes and people of power and influence to come out and speak.”<sup>115</sup> During the early years of the Trump administration, declining the ceremonial White House has emerged as both a political statement and a call to action.

Trump’s response to such activities further reveals the transformation of the tradition into a site of symbolic struggle that weighs the role of the athlete in society and shapes the discursive boundaries of proper citizenship and patriotism. Following his pattern of sanctioning athletes’ participation in political discourse and disciplining primarily black athletes for perceived signs of disrespect and disobedience, Trump tweeted this response to Curry’s comments: “Going to the White House is considered a great honor for a championship team. Stephen Curry [sic] is hesitating, therefore [sic] invitation is withdrawn!”<sup>116</sup> Athletes immediately jumped to Curry’s defense, with longstanding rival LeBron James tweeting Trump, “U bum @StephenCurry30 already said he ain’t going! So therefore ain’t no invite. Going to White House was a great honor until you showed up!”<sup>117</sup> In an official statement, the Golden State Warriors further supported their

<sup>111</sup> J.A. Adande, “Purpose of ‘I Can’t Breathe’ T-Shirts,” *ESPN.com*, 12/10/2014, [http://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/12010612/nba-stars-making-statement-wearing-breathe-shirts](http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/12010612/nba-stars-making-statement-wearing-breathe-shirts).

<sup>112</sup> Daniel Rapaport, “LeBron James Says Trump ‘Doesn’t Give a F---’ About the People,” *Sports Illustrated*, 2/15/18, <https://www.si.com/nba/2018/02/15/lebron-james-donald-trump-comments>.

<sup>113</sup> Jeremy Woo, “Stephen Curry Says He’ll Vote ‘No’ on Warriors’ Potential White House Trip,” *Sports Illustrated*, 9/22/17, <https://www.si.com/nba/2017/09/22/stephen-curry-warriors-white-house-visit-no-vote>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Chris Haynes, “Kevin Durant on President Trump: ‘I Don’t Agree with What He Agrees with,’” 8/17/17, [http://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/20371337/kevin-durant-golden-state-warriors-no-intention-visiting-white-house-harsh-words-president-donald-trump](http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/20371337/kevin-durant-golden-state-warriors-no-intention-visiting-white-house-harsh-words-president-donald-trump).

<sup>116</sup> Chris Barnewall, “Trump Sees Steph Curry’s White House Comments, Rescinds Warriors’ Invitation,” *CBSSports.com*, <https://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/trump-sees-steph-currys-white-house-comments-rescinds-warriors-invitation/>.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Smerconish, “If Invited, the Eagles Should Go to the White House,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2/13/18, [http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/michael\\_smerconish/eagles-white-house-trump-super-bowl-michael-smerconish-opinion-20180213.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/michael_smerconish/eagles-white-house-trump-super-bowl-michael-smerconish-opinion-20180213.html).

players, proclaiming, “We believe there is nothing more American than our citizens having the right to express themselves freely on matters important to them.”<sup>118</sup> Rhetorical gestures towards an ideal and essential America have long been crucial to presidential sports encomia, but a team refusing to visit the White House due to different interpretations of these very concepts is unique to the Trump presidency.

“In lieu of a visit to the White House,” the Warriors’ statement continued, “we have decided that we’ll constructively use our trip to the nation’s capital in February to celebrate equality, diversity, and inclusion - the values that we embrace as an organization.”<sup>119</sup> In a pointed countermove to Trump’s disinvitation via Twitter, the team toured the National Museum of African American History with a group of children from the Seat Pleasant Rec Center, where Durant played basketball as a kid. The Finals MVP noted, “If we’d gone to the White House, we’d have reminisced about what we did in the past.”<sup>120</sup> However, by making the trip about “learning and inspiring youth” instead, Durant and the Warriors disrupted a familiar formula and rearticulated its ideological significance, revisiting and potentially strengthening the very values that the ritual has purported to represent for so long.<sup>121</sup>

### **The Great Unifier?**

The discourses surrounding the ceremonial White House visit under President Trump have made it increasingly clear that the scripts inscribing the athlete’s role in society, as well as sports’ rhetorical value as an emblem of overarching national ideologies, are in a state of flux. The presidential sports encomia of previous administrations occasionally pointed to the dynamic, unstable, and historically contingent nature of these relationships and concepts. For example, the post 9/11 militarism of George W. Bush’s administration mobilized the rhetoric surrounding sports champions through a unique administrative lens that served to reinforce and justify the president’s political agenda. Yet prior to Trump’s election, the White House visit typically revealed concerted efforts to articulate a cohesive and unified vision of the American dream and experience, connecting the triumphs of successful teams to the foundational and essentialized values of a broadly construed American people. Whether these discourses were directed towards international conflict or domestic progress, they attempted to reconstitute an unproblematic and agreed-upon notion of the nation and its character. The divisive social, political, and cultural climate that has accompanied the early years of Trump’s presidency profoundly complicates a familiar and often predictable ritual. A new wave of athlete activism, armed with the affordances of social media and frequently situated in direct opposition to the President’s controversial rhetoric, has disrupted the public relations routine and inspired debate about what constitutes an ideal America and a good citizen. While Trump has attempted to structure

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<sup>118</sup> Chris Barnewall, “The Warriors Release Statement in Response to Trump Rescinding White House Invitation,” *CBSSports.com*, 9/23/17, <https://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/warriors-release-statement-in-response-to-trump-rescinding-white-house-invitation/>.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Tim Bontemps, “‘We’re Celebrating It How We Want to Celebrate It’: Kevin Durant on the Warriors’ D.C. Trip,” 2/27/18, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/sports/wp/2018/02/27/kevin-durant-on-warriors-african-american-museum-visit-this-was-about-learning/?utm\\_term=.c5417f17ea0d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/sports/wp/2018/02/27/kevin-durant-on-warriors-african-american-museum-visit-this-was-about-learning/?utm_term=.c5417f17ea0d).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

and sanction a docile sports culture, athletes have increasingly used their expanding platforms to defy the President, address important issues, and preserve the unifying capacity of sports in contested times.

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