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It was my intention today to write a blog post discussing the issue of female deacons. It was not to be.

President Donald Trump has a powerful way of making media and everyday Americans focus on the topic of his choice. The president has decided to create a culture war over professional football players kneeling for the playing of the national anthem, and he has succeeded.

Many Americans are angry. Some have burned jerseys from their formerly favorite football teams. It has become impossible not to talk about this issue.

Yet, this was not a significant issue until the president chose to bring it up. Last season, a quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, took a knee during the national anthem to protest police treatment of black citizens. A few other players joined in. Kaepernick ultimately lost his job and no other team has been willing to hire him. It was only after Trump's remarks at a rally in Alabama that large numbers of players and owners felt the need to respond.

It seems the president doesn't want us to be talking about some other more significant issues that may not be going so well for him. We could talk about the failure, once again, of a health care bill intended to repeal the Affordable Care Act. There is the escalating crisis in North Korea that shows no signs of abating. Millions in Puerto Rico are suffering and without power after Hurricane Maria. There is even a special election for a senate seat in Alabama in which the president's candidate failed to win. Yet, we are talking about a few football players exercising their constitutional rights.

On the substance, most would agree that we should not condone taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem. Yet, when we demand a particular form of patriotism from others, we risk losing sight of the core American values we are celebrating with our patriotism.

The Supreme Court has ruled that even burning the American flag is part of our free speech rights. Conservative [Justice Antonin Scalia concurred with that decision](#). There is no question that these players had every right to do what they did, just as other Americans have every right to disagree with their actions.

An additional ingredient is needed, however, if our democracy is to remain effective: for both sides to show respect for the other. It is difficult to engender that respect when the leader of our country finds it useful, time and time again, to create divisiveness to advance his own personal or political interests. This is something we have never seen in our democracy and it should give us pause.

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Unfortunately, the president seems to believe that if someone or some group is opposing him, they must be brought into line. Does he somehow see everyone standing for the national anthem as a way of having all the people affirming him and his presidency? In North Korea, failing to stand and pay homage to the supreme leader would be a dangerous exercise. Nazi Germany was all about visible adulation of the führer.

There seem to be authoritarian characteristics in this president that could dramatically alter the character of this country should they be allowed to fester.

In 1775, Samuel Johnson said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." He was, of course, not speaking about true patriotism, but using the guise of patriotism to hide or distract from truths that one doesn't want revealed.

We all love our country. We need to think long and hard about what really makes our country great, and why it deserves our love and respect. This country was born out of dissent. The dissent of the American people throughout its history has often brought us back to the important values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Time will determine whether we can retain the high purpose of our nation in the face of a president who demonstrates little awareness of what this country is all about.