

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So thank you all for joining us here tonight, and thank you, Mark, so much for braving the polar vortex to come out to Cambridge tonight. So I think it will be a really interesting and, hopefully, provocative conversation. But I thought we'd start off just a little bit by talking about your book. And I'm really interested in where this book comes from, why did you write it, and why this shift away from electoral politics into sports politics, of all things?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Well, that wasn't the intent. The intent wasn't the sports politics part. I mean, essentially, I've been covering national politics for about 20 years, and after the last campaign, I needed a break from politics. So what better place to take a break from politics than into the NFL during the Trump years, right? So that didn't work out terribly well.

I mean, this was-- look, football has been a great passion of mine for a long time. I'd written a magazine story on Tom Brady in 2015 and then the NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell in 2016. So I sort of had an annual side project of just one big magazine story a year on NFL figures, and that indicated to me that there was a lot more to that world that I wanted to get to know.

And also, just there was not a great sort of body of literature of honest writing about the NFL. There's a lot of glorification, a lot of insider accounts, but this was more of an outsider account that frankly gave away some secret handshakes and caused some discomfort within the league, which I was happy to do. So it just felt like an adventure, and here we are. So it turns out, it was not the escape from politics I thought but it worked out anyway.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: I thought we'd get into some of those politics. I'm a Patriots fan but also a Cleveland sports fan. Born and raised in Cleveland. When it comes to football, it's been the best of times and the worst of times for me for 20-some years. Go Browns.

Well, as a Cleveland fan, LeBron James holds a special place in our town's heart. I think savior might be the actual role that he plays. Recently, he decided to wade into the controversy surrounding the NFL. Either tweeted or on record said that he had a view of NFL ownership and he said there's a kind of slave mentality behind the ownership these days.

So that was very powerful that he said that and it certainly was discussed widely, and I thought we would just get into some of this. Like, on your views, is he on to something? And what does it also say that you have sports figures and celebrities like LeBron James who feel compelled that they have to speak to this?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot going on there. I mean, I think-- first of all, Cleveland, specifically, it hosted the Republican convention when Donald Trump was nominated in 2016. And I spent a little time in Cleveland off and on for a number of years and I know the basic contours of the history of the Browns and the Cavaliers and the Indians, and so forth.

And that was a convention that a lot of people were dreading and worried about. I mean, there was talk of like protests and riots and all kinds of added security because Donald Trump was about to be nominated by one of our two major parties.

And I remember getting to Cleveland and-- with all due respect to Cleveland, I mean, this was not one of the sort of marquee cities that you would sort of--

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: You're hurting me right now.

MARK LEIBOVICH: No, I mean, look-- but Cleveland was a great place to have a convention. And the single biggest reason was that about three or four weeks earlier, the Cavaliers had won that championship. And I had never really seen that palpably how sports can have this positive effect on a community and people feeling so good about themselves in an environment that was so divisive otherwise. In a moment, for the country, that was one of the most divisive elections. Certainly, I can remember.

So ever since then, I've had this incredibly warm spot for Cleveland and also had a more personal appreciation for the LeBron James story and sort of the Cleveland sports story. So that's not pandering but it's actually true.

But LeBron James-- I mean, he mentioned-- yeah, he used the word slave mentality. I mean that's a word and that's an idea that has been used privately in the NFL for many, many, many years, both by a lot of African-American players but also from the owners' side. I mean, there is a famous somewhat infamous quote uttered by Tex Schramm, who was the long-time CEO or sort of head of the Dallas Cowboys. Who, during a union negotiation with Gene Upshaw, who was the head of the NFL Players Association then, he was African-American, he was a Hall of Fame lineman for the Oakland Raiders.

Tex Schramm said, hey, you know what, we're the ranchers. You're the cattle. OK. So that quote which has been repeated many, many times goes very much to what Gene Upshaw called the plantation mentality of a sport in which every single one of the 32 billionaire owners except for one is a white, almost entirely male.

80% of the workforce is African-American. The only sport without guaranteed contracts and there is a sense, as LeBron James certainly picked up on, that this is a sport that is not as progressive or as tolerant of political views of players being outspoken as they would be in the NBA.

And I think that that gave voice to it in a way that because it was LeBron James, got a great deal of traction. And I mean, yeah, I'm sure people got their backs up but I think he spoke a truth to a lot of people in both the NFL and in the NBA.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So I think that that is a pretty nice segue into probably the most, one of the most controversial topics around the NFL, which is Colin Kaepernick and his experience in

the NFL. We're really I think interested in hearing a little bit more about your interpretation of Colin Kaepernick.

Whether it's his experience on the football field, how he's then been treated in the NFL, the process that he's going through right now. And in particular, I'm also wonder I'm also wondering if 10 years ago if this is something that would have been a thing. And I specifically think or if it's something also that's unique to say Colin Kaepernick or to Eric Reid or something like that.

I mean you have somebody like Marshawn Lynch who by his own-- confession has been sitting for the National anthem for the past 12 years. And nobody has had anything to say about that. So I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about that.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah, I mean I think in addition to everything, I mean all the dynamics involved, I mean, Colin Kaepernick was an example of what happens when Donald Trump finds a divisive issue and jumps right into the middle of it and decides to just heighten the divisiveness and make it the issue that he did.

Because without Donald Trump, you remember when Colin Kaepernick started his protest during the National anthem in 2016, it was certainly noticed. And it was controversial and there were sort of counter-- I mean there were a lot of people voicing dissatisfaction, and great upset over this. But it was sort of contained.

There were maybe about a dozen players around the league. And I think one thing I found about football is that people's attention does want to somehow default back to the field. And until Donald Trump made an inescapable issue and made it I guess, in the words of Arthur Blank who owns the Falcons, sort of a manhood issue, he made it an issue in which NFL players felt they had to respond to Donald Trump, who was calling them SOB's.

And it just sort of forced out into the open this incredibly uncomfortable conversation. But I think an overdue conversation inside the league. But I do think that-- look, Colin Kaepernick for better for worse and for worse, is that he should be playing quarterback in the NFL somewhere. I think most people would agree with that in different circumstances.

For better, I think his place in history is assured for whatever that's worth. But I also think that he has, if you want to in an activist context raise awareness for things that you're passionate about and issues that you think are important, he's done that. So in some weird kind of perverse way, maybe he has benefited from the perhaps demagogic use that Donald Trump has made of this issue.

So do you-- just a quick follow up question, do you think that through his actions, through his protests, that he's influenced the league. Do you think he's influenced the owners, the players, maybe even the--

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I think there's no question about it. I think this is not a group of people in charge of the National Football League and who own the National Football League that is willing to-- that is in any great hurry to change. The status quo has worked really, really well for the NFL for a long, long time.

There was this moment in big game where I at the height of the crisis when Trump spoke up in Alabama. And there were hundreds of players kneeling before or during the National anthem in 2017 where Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the league called this an emergency meeting of a bunch of players and a bunch of owners to meet in New York to discuss what to do next. How do we get through this crisis?

And one of the participants in the meeting was nice enough to audiotape or tape the event and share it with me and a colleague Ken Belsen, and that's all in one of the chapters in the book. So everyone should read the book. But one takeaway from that was just how utterly clueless and how utterly scared the owners were of just doing anything that would trigger Donald Trump, or trigger their fans.

Because I mean, the NFL they just want people to watch football. And they're very much of these stick to sports kind of sensibility and attitude. And frankly, a lot of players were insisting that they actually have a greater social consciousness.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: I guess I want to follow up on this too because I'm-- maybe invite you to dig a little deeper into just how much change we're seeing in ownership. You mentioned it but maybe say more. Colin Kaepernick hasn't been m and it certainly hasn't been the case that there haven't been plenty of teams.

The Browns until this year among them that could have used a quarterback of his stature. And in addition, if I remembering correctly, like before the season this year, ownership signed off on a like policy on where they would stand when it came to kneeling or sitting. They went over horribly. Was there any learning going on?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah, these are not learning people by and large to be honest. I mean, the league committed \$80 million to social justice programs across the league to their credit. And I guess that has done you know well and there are a lot of players on a number of teams. I mean Devin McCourty, Matthew Slater and the Patriots have been very, very active in the communities in some criminal reform measures.

And the league has put some money behind it. But the fact is, I think the league is mostly just thrilled that this issue has not gone away, but it's an issue that President Trump has ignored this year. He's moved on to shut downs and midterm elections, and things that have sort of taken his attention away.

But no, I mean, look, this is a league that only responds to some kind of pressure. And in that regard, Colin Kaepernick created the first ripple of what became enough of a critical mass of

pressure to enact some change. So they are still a long way away from the NBA and other sports leagues frankly and sort of being at the cutting edge of this.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So I'm also curious, especially since we're coming up in the Super Bowl, there's been a lot of conversation about Super Bowl, performance in the Super Bowl, but then also of course, we know this kind of the spectacle of the halftime show. And so as artists have been announced, we've seen this kind of major celebrity boycott of the Super Bowl.

We've also seen a couple of artists, I think believe could've been Gladys Knight and Travis Scott Black artists right who have signed on to be met with kind of an immediate backlash. And so part of what's happening right now, they're getting backlash but they're also getting applause from different quarters for saying Thanks for taking the stage.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So it seems like, I mean, it's tapping into something both something that is representative of football but something that feels bigger than football. Or maybe it's a reflection of just how big football is and how political it is.

MARK LEIBOVICH: It is and in some ways this very much mimics the culture war. I mean, this is a very coastal sort of celebrity East Coast, West Coast kind of elite sort of thing that Donald Trump would campaign against. And in some ways, the culture war that erupted in football around kneeling, around people who think that the game is too violent maybe elites on the coast.

Whether you're an entertainment executive or a suburban parent or someone in the media or something like that, maybe you're considered just one of these elites who is not going to understand the heartland sensibility that makes people go out on a Friday night and to watch high school football in Texas or Pennsylvania.

In the same way that Donald Trump would speak to these same people and say, look, they don't understand you. They have contempt for you. And Donald Trump you just know would say that the people who are not performing at the Super Bowl are the people who have disdain for football. They have disdain for you, America. And what I think that the lesson there though is, I mean you sort of have to choose a side at this point.

I mean Nike had a very controversial decision earlier in the year when they said, you know what, we're actually going to pick a side. Colin Kaepernick is going to be the head of our marketing campaign this year. And Trump immediately took after them. There was talk that their stock was going to tank. I remember this because this is the day the book came out and I got questions about this and Trump for all week.

There's no football talk whatsoever. But I mean, after two days of stock took a hit, I mean, Nike has had like explosive revenues. And they sort of decided that they want to be on the side of

the divide in America that identifies with Colin Kaepernick. And they made the determination that these are the wealthier, better educated, younger, more diverse slice of America that is a better sort of horse to bet on than the Trump America.

Now it's obviously not that binary. But look, it's shown that it's been proven to be over the last five, six months a really, really successful business decision by Nikes part, on Nikes part. And I don't think I wouldn't say that their these social conscience cutting edge of everything here because they're making a business decision but I do think that they conveyed the value of picking a side.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: I guess I at least can understand Kaepernick's actions is drawing our awareness to broad societal problems. So it's not just isolated to, let's look at the NFL and how the NFL is run. It's not just isolated to this precedent saying, look, we have a real problem here.

I guess what I want to start chatting about maybe a little bit is specifically, what do you think is reasonable or unreasonable demands in terms of the relationship between our political expectations and our love of football? For instance, Harry Potter of all people, what's his name actually? Daniel Radcliffe--

MARK LEIBOVICH: I have to look that up. He took after Brady, didn't he?

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Yeah, he did.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Yeah, so Daniel Radcliffe this past week at Sundance-- we're done with this question already. He was a fan. He announced himself. He said, look, I had been a fan but I can't continue to support Tom Brady the Patriots until Tom Brady gets rid of that, make America Great Again.

Hat in his locker. So is that, I guess [INAUDIBLE] is that the sort of thing where-- is that a reasonable request as this, are we off the track here? I just want to throw that out.

MARK LEIBOVICH: I'm going do OK, so I'm not going to put my apologist for Tom Brady and Patriots hat on for a second here.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Are you sure?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. Totally positive. Tom Brady, yes he had-- we're being heckled. I wanted to be heckled. I would have been cool. Tom Brady is not political. He is an old friend of Donald Trump. I mean, he I think would love that little hat to have not been there. He didn't go to the White House.

He recoils from the part of the political discussion that he, through his own, I guess, carelessness sort of wound up in the middle of. But that's sort of like a two-year-old story in some ways. So Tom Brady does not-- and I don't know if he was asked about this during opening night of the Super Bowl this year, but I remember, being at his little podium at the Super Bowl press conference last year and the year before, and him just like saying, please, don't ask me questions about this.

So I don't know if he was asked about it this year, but look, I mean Tom is I guess he has the right to be completely apolitical. Robert Kraft, Bill Belichick. I mean, for better or for worse, if you root for the Patriots people are going to associate your team with Donald Trump. And I think to some degree, the owner or the coach Brady had brought that on.

And that's one of the, frankly, unpleasant things about being a Patriots fan. You can't just say, no, they didn't deflate football. Or that was a witch Hunter, that was wrong. I mean actually, Donald Trump used the word witch hunt about deflate gate before he started using it around Russia. Little known fact.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Trial run kind of--

MARK LEIBOVICH: I don't know, he used it to me. And I quoted him. And it was like, it's a whole other story. But he-- Yeah, so anyway, no I just like-- look, there was I remember when they were playing the Falcons which was like a couple of weeks after the Trump inauguration. I mean, that game became like this proxy fight for Red America and Blue America.

And for better or for worse, the Pats were Trump America. And I remember, the Falcons went up 7-0, and someone tweeted, Atlanta Falcons seven, Donald Trump nothing. It's like the Patriots didn't even have an identity anymore. And then someone else tweeted something like, the Atlanta Falcons respect the independent judiciary. So it got very much in the weeds very, very quickly. Yeah, so that's what it looks like to try to escape politics into football circa 2017, 2018.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Well, there's a way. I mean, to even use that phrase "proxy fight," right? That's the Super Bowl last year. That it's absolutely a proxy fight. In talking, I mentioned earlier that I'm a Pats fan. My whole household is a Pats fan, even though my husband is from New York and should not be a Pats fan.

We have friends who are Eagles fans and who are like, no, this is greater than just football, this is something bigger than football. So I think that proxy is really important. But I'm also wondering, as a Pats fan, as someone who grew up in this area, is there room for us to critique the Pats, coming from a place of concern, particularly around these issues even beyond Trump, right? Deflate Gate.

MARK LEIBOVICH: I am a total Deflate Gate apologist. the Trump thing is harder to defend, because look, I-- all right. So I will say this as a Pats fan who lives outside of New England now.

They do hate us. That is legit. That's not just like, "they hate us." It's not just our drummed-up persecution complex. The hatred of the New England Patriots outside of New England is absolutely real.

And it's not just, "well, they're jealous of us." I mean, that's part of it, but the Pittsburgh Steelers, the San Francisco 49ers-- the other dynasties in the history of the NFL were not hated like this. So, I think that there is some baggage that the personality of the coach, perhaps the arrogance, gracelessness of the owner, perhaps the certain unlikability in some circles of the quarterback does bring on themselves.

The cheating scandals don't help. Aaron Hernandez doesn't help. The fan behavior in some ways doesn't help, to be perfectly frank about this.

It is a bit of a cross to bear. I say in the book that the Pats fans do lead the league in crosses to bear. But look, I was saying to someone backstage-- I mean it's just such a pleasure to watch them play football, especially the last few weeks. That game against Kansas City was just such an intensely great sports watching experience. At the end of the day, the football can be really, really good, and Tom Brady is great to watch.

So, I'll end that on a really simplistic, innocent notion-- if there is such a thing in this conversation.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: At some point, I want to bring it back to the Pats.

MARK LEIBOVICH: [INAUDIBLE] at this point?

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: No, not yet.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Are we going to talk about the Browns again?

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: No, I won't.

MARK LEIBOVICH: The Browns are ascendant.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Indeed. I used to think that there was this weird relationship between the Pats and the Browns. If the Pats were diminished, the Browns would arise rise. But I get that story, besides being absurd, doesn't really play out or anything.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Belichick, he coached them, and there was that. So, yeah.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: That's depressing. I want to bring it back to-- so, football and politics, right? So--

MARK LEIBOVICH: That's why we're here.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Tom Brady, or we can say, Tom Brady is apolitical. He got caught with Make America Great, but. What interests me is the space that we seem to be in, where you can't avoid-- where, in particular, players can't avoid being political. For instance, there's not a lot of press about who's going to visit the White House and who's not. The Clemson thing happened, and now we're just finding out that a lot of the Black players of the Clemson team were not even there at the time. I just read about this.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Is that true?

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Yeah, I just read about this today.

MARK LEIBOVICH: They had some really good fast food, apparently.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: I mean, there was quite a feast, yeah. You know, already the Red Sox are-- we're already seeing-- I mean, this is obviously baseball, where Mookie Betts, you know, is-- so where are, I mean, what is one to say, and what are your thoughts on the fact that what had been apolitical events-- even when they were at the White House, if that makes any sense, just sort of, let's just go and celebrate this-- have now become a testament?

MARK LEIBOVICH: I was saying to someone earlier, I forget who was, that if I were running for president, either as a Democrat or as a Republican, in 2020, my first promise would be, I'm going to be a president that you don't have to think about for weeks at a time. Whether you like me or hate me, whether you disagree with me or agree with me, whether you're from the other party or my party. Just there will be weeks where you just, like, there'll be boring stuff going on.

Because, I mean, look, I mean, you're right. The Red Sox win the World Series, a great, feel good thing if you're a Red Sox fan. Very likable team. And you know, first thing Alex Cora is asked, you going to the White House? After, you know, and Alex Cora, the manager of the Red Sox, very outspoken about Donald Trump's Puerto Rican policy. And you know, now the MVP of the league is not going. You see the Globe had a rundown of who's going and who's not going, and you basically have the not goings or the maybe not going as were all Black or Hispanic, white players. And so OK, so the divide, the cultural divide, the racial divide, the political divide, boom. It's like, this is our baseball team.

I mean, the bipartisan trip to the White House, no matter whether Bush is president or Obama's president or whoever is president, Reagan's president, that's over. I mean, the Kennedy Center Honors, I mean, that used to be a great sort of ceremonial thing. The president used to sit in the box. And that went away as soon as this happened. So look, I mean, this is what happens when you have a president who is going to tweet something, you know, uncharitable about Meryl Streep, if Meryl Streep decides to, at the Oscars, say something about Donald Trump. I mean, look, this is the world we're living in now. And the things that used to be sort of safe escape

places, where you can sort of feel good about entertainment or sports or whatever, are no longer.

So look, I hope it goes away one day. Because I think it would be nice. The best thing about sports can be escape, and we don't have that now. Yeah. But again, how sort-- it does go to how the culture war has become so writ large in so many other areas of our life that we hadn't normally thought about it in.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Well, I wonder if there's a way that we can also expand this a little bit. So beyond this idea of the culture war. Because it's not just the culture war that the NFL is finding itself in the midst of. It's also, the league is facing very serious problems when it comes to things like CTE, or the rate of domestic violence amongst its players. And I'm curious, just from your research or your writing, what you found is, how is the league addressing this? Particularly as the American public is reacting as this information is coming out, and reacting very negatively to this information.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, certainly health and safety, and head injuries, and spinal injuries. But mostly concussions. That is existential issue one in the League. I mean, if you look at-- I mean, the League is paying more attention to this now than they were 10, 20 years ago. There's no question about it. They are trying to make some positive change. But it's pretty much the margins. It's rule changes, it's equipment, which is not insignificant.

But the NFL is not going to be a safe game. Football is not going to be a safe game. And while it might not be making a dent in the TV ratings, or the profitability of a lot of the teams, youth participation rates are way down. And it's true of sports across the board, because I think in many ways, people are now-- yesterday's sort of boyhood sort of schoolboy girl athletes are now, they're on computer consoles all day. It's just, a lot of recreation has moved indoors. So that's a part of it. But, look. I mean, you don't know where the next generation of football players are going to come.

And also frankly, it's really hard for youth sports leagues and high school teams to get insurance. I mean, insurance is a huge, huge problem for football, and schools are eliminating programs. So you do sort of wonder, where are tomorrow's football players going to come? Is this going to be an even greater bifurcated thing, where we're just like an even poorer population? Where it sort of goes the way of boxing and it becomes sort of a gladiator sport in some ways?

So look. I mean, that to me is an issue that, I mean, the League is-- it's just sort of a cultural awareness. And again, the League would say that the elites on the coasts are overreacting. Media executives, academics in ivory towers. Like they don't have an appreciation for what it's really like, and the sort of benefits. I mean, if you really want to ignite a conversation, go to any football coach at these NFL coaches' breakfasts every year, and just listen to NFL coaches get really defensive about the "we hate football" crowd. So look, that's one.

I mean, domestic violence. It's a huge issue. It's become a huger issue now that a lot of these incidents, or some of these incidents, have been videotaped, have gone viral. I mean, it's sort of unclear whether there was a higher rate of domestic violence among football players than non football players. I mean, you could debate that all day. But no. It's a terrible look, and look, if the NFL need, unlike a political candidate, they need everybody. They need men, they need women, they need whites and Blacks and Hispanic fans. And young fans, old fans. I mean, they can't just sort of concentrate on a pretty narrow sector.

So I mean, that's not really an answer to your question, but I think there is-- the League has shown, again and again, an inability to deal with problems well beyond a sort of simplistic fix. I mean, this is not a group of cultural visionaries by any stretch. Or business leader, you know, visionaries by any stretch.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So what does the League owe its players? Besides money.

MARK LEIBOVICH: That's a great question.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: And League minimums.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, I would say that the League owes its players-- first of all, I mean, if you ask the players what they feel the League should give them that they don't, it's guaranteed contracts. I mean, the NFL is the only major sports league that doesn't basically guarantee, or doesn't have guaranteed contracts for virtually all of its players. I think they would say transparency, truth. I mean, some kind of awareness from the medical training establishment of what they are actually putting themselves through.

I mean, because look, the doctors and the trainers that can clear these players to play every Sunday work for the team. I mean, they're not like earning-- they're losing money for the team if the borderline, maybe injured, maybe not injured linebacker isn't taking the field. So I mean, I think there's-- you could go down a long list of what they could be owed. But I think honesty, transparency and guaranteed contracts, if I had to guess. [INAUDIBLE]

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: So I know we're getting to the point where we're going to want to start taking questions from you. So I'll use this opportunity to bring it back for a moment, to the Patriots. 18 plus years of complete domination.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Not complete, but they've done well. Yeah.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Yeah.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Some of those Super Bowl losses really hurt.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD:

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Yeah, yeah. The three out of the eight-- Yeah. You're watching a quarterback age, which usually ends people's careers. He's appearing again. Bill Belichick demonstrates that no matter what team you give him, including a season in which he lost Tom Brady, he can do wonders. The question that has been on a lot of people's minds-- and I feel that I'm asking it so that you don't have to-- is, have the Patriots sold their soul to the devil?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Whoa. Didn't see that one coming.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: [LAUGHTER]

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: And let me just build off of this for one second. There's a new-- I just saw this before coming here, and it's just unbelievably marvelous. Like, there's a new Sam Adams beer coming out this week. The goat beer. But it's a picture of a football player with, like, a goat's head, that looks Satanic. It looks, like, straight out of the movie *The Witch*, or something like that. So I'm wondering if they're just embracing this. Have they sold their soul?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Wow. The answer to your question is, no, they haven't sold their soul.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: [CHUCKLES]

MARK LEIBOVICH: No. Look, it's like sort of loving your children. You sort of love your team, because that's what you're born with, right? I mean, everyone says that. So when I talk about this book, and when I talk about football, and I talk about politics, in places other than my home of New England, they mention I'm a Patriots fan. And you meet-- there's immediately the hisses and the boos, and I have to be really sheepish and faux apologetic, and pretend that I'm one of the good ones and not one of the obnoxious ones. And I'm gracious. And I say nice things about, like, Cleveland, for instance. Just to sort of make them feel good about themselves.

But no, look. I mean, every-- if you're going to sort of go with a deal with the devil standard, every NFL team is in great debt to the devil. Because I mean, this is not a terribly attractive, in many cases, moral business. And you know, people ask me all the time: how, given what you know about the NFL, can you keep watching football? And I give a very, very sort of, I would say, lame answer. Which is, we have Brady and Belichick. Talk to me in a few years when they're not there anymore. Again, it's a terribly unsatisfactory answer, I realize that.

But look, I mean, I reserve the right to change my mind one day. Because I have learned a lot, and this is-- it's in the book-- but I've learned a lot about the League, about the people who run it, the people who own it. That leads me to think that it's probably not worthy of what I think is the greatness of the game itself. And the greatness of a lot of the players, and the commitments they make.

And I mean, again. Just watching that AFC Championship game last weekend, it was just such a beautiful thing to watch a team come together. And to me, that is the best of us. It's the best of

values, and teamwork, and America. It sounds corny and everything, but that's where my attention keeps getting grabbed. And that's where I think the beauty and the truth is, of all this.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So we're going to open it up to questions right now. And we had four microphones positioned around the room. We have two up top, and two in the audience.

MARK LEIBOVICH: By the way, thank you everyone for coming. It's cold, and like, there's people up there. It's always great when there are people up there. So.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So we ask that you come up to the microphone. And we just have three quick rules that we ask everyone to follow. The first one is, all questioners should identify yourselves as you are asking your question. We ask that you ask one brief question per person. And then of course, no speeches, please. Questions should end with a question mark. So why don't we start it off right here?

AUDIENCE: Hi. Louie Gadema. For four years in a row now, Super Bowl ratings have declined. And with CTE and insurance, and all the other things that you mentioned, I'm wondering if we have passed peak football?

MARK LEIBOVICH: There was some talk that we had. But look, the ratings have skyrocketed this year. So we'll see. I mean, I think-- look, the NFL has a standard of incredible-- I mean like, 48 of the top 50 most watched TV shows in America last year were all NFL football games. I mean, it's insane. And so, yeah. Do you-- I mean, if they hit 47 this year, is that like, are we down peak? I mean, look, they're skating at a very, very high level. So I mean, look, I'm guessing that they will have pretty good ratings this Sunday. And you know, we'll see where they are in 10, 20 years. But I think short term, I mean, they obviously are pleased. And a lot of these guys are old enough and rich enough so that they can afford to only think short term.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Question over here.

AUDIENCE: Tucker Boyton. Question is, John Tomasi wrote an article for the Globe criticizing a lot of the white players on the Red Sox, for not speaking up and taking a stand with the minority players who didn't go to the White House. Do you think that the white players on the Red Sox, or generally the players who maybe agree with Trump, or are not so impassioned just to say that they don't want to go to the White House-- do they have a responsibility to stand up for the minority players who don't want to go to the White House?

MARK LEIBOVICH: That's a good question. I think-- I hate this answer, but it's not for me to say. Because I don't know the dynamic inside the clubhouse. But it wouldn't surprise me at all if Alex Cora, the leader of the team, who's widely respected on the team-- if he said no, I mean, we'll see what the white players do. I mean, I don't know if it's that-- I mean, I'm not as familiar with the dynamics of the team. But certainly, I mean, it's sort of undeniable when you see the players who, in the NFL, who didn't stand for the national anthem, I mean, overwhelmingly

were African-American. I mean Chris Long-- played briefly with the Pats, plays for the Eagles now-- was an exception to this. But yeah.

I mean, look, I'm guessing that this has created a great deal of strain inside a lot of locker rooms. I know it did two years ago, during the height of the Kaepernick sort of Trump protests. And based on my knowledge of these teams, I mean, most of these guys don't really want to think about this. And now they have to. So again, in that sense, it's been positive, in that it's sort of brought these issues to a fore. But ultimately, it's been very divisive to a lot of these teams, too.

So I don't know. I mean, I'm not I'm not John Tomasi, and I'm not going to say that they have a responsibility. Because I don't know what the stakes are. I also don't know what they're going to do. So I mean, we'll see how this-- I don't know how much people have really thought about this. We'll see what it looks like when we get closer.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Sure.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: All right, right here.

AUDIENCE: Hi, good evening. My name is Keziah, and I'm a junior at the college. Given your experience interviewing lots of politicians and people in D.C., how different were your conversations talking to either football players or leadership in the League?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, I'll say, well, first of all. I was-- I've interviewed a lot of presidents and presidential candidates and celebrities and CEOs over the years. And I have never been as nervous by-- not even close to being as nervous as when I interviewed Tom Brady. I mean, I remember-- so I was in this Starbucks, back when Starbucks was just a coffee place. So not a place where you had to think about a million political-- anyway, I'll put that aside. Outside his place in New York. And I was a sweaty mess. And I was like, oh my god, what is going on here? It's like, there's something about your athletic heroes that you just sort of want to just sort of hide in nostalgia, and hope that they don't become human beings. You just want to like, just want to keep them larger than life. Even though I was 48 or 49 years old at the time.

Beyond that, I mean, there's a lot of nervousness. I mean, a lot of these owners, a lot of the-- Commissioner Goodell, I mean they choose their words very carefully. I mean, Roger Goodell is a terrible person to interview. He never says anything, he's very controlled, he insults your intelligence. He just doesn't give you a lot. And he's as compelling in person as he is from a podium. In some ways, I mean, he got a lot of criticism for going into hiding after this terrible non call in the New Orleans Rams game last week. But I do think that him being in hiding is actually preferable than him coming out in public. So yeah.

But there's a lot of overlap between people. I mean, a lot of the NFL owners feel accustomed to a certain-- or, they expect a certain deference. There was a lot more clubbiness, there was a lot more sense that you're going to take care of me, right? Robert Kraft was like, he knew I was a Patriots fan. So I think he expected a level of kinder treatment than he ultimately got in the book. So you know, I'm still a Pats fan, but I don't know if Robert Kraft is a fan of mine. Which is fine. As long as Brady likes me. I was going to email him after the season, to see if he still likes me.

So, no. But there's a lot of overlap. I mean, ultimately, these are people who, in politics and sports and business, in sort of rich powerful people. And everyone has a story to tell. And the tension that I as a journalist have, or we as journalists have, is that we have a different story to tell. Hopefully ours more closely approximates the truth.

AUDIENCE: Thanks.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Sure.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Question right here.

AUDIENCE: My name is Nicholas Austice. I have a kind of two part question. The first one is, the NFL puts these commercials on about how they love families and they love communities. It seems like they're widowing and orphaning kids and wives by having games on Monday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. I wonder what you think about that. The second question is, it's bubbling below the surface, it occasionally gets written about, that these guys take a tremendous amount of punishment. And the only remedy to relax their bodies is THC. And the NFL seems to have their head in the ground on that one, too. I was wondering what you think about that.

MARK LEIBOVICH: THC being--

AUDIENCE: Smoking pot, and taking CBDs.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah, sure.

AUDIENCE: Or rubbing their body down with the oil.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah, OK. So, two part question, OK. So the first part of the question, so, orphaning. Yeah. I mean, too many games, too many night games. Kids can't watch-- I mean, that's been true in baseball for a while. And I think one of the reasons baseball has sort of lost a lot of appeal among young people is that the people who run baseball have been too stupid to have-- they just don't have a lot of games where kids can just watch. So yeah.

I mean, I think the upside to the League there is that they make a ton of money selling ads on Monday night, Sunday night, Thursday night, whenever else they have windows. I mean

personally, as someone who's not always free to watch whatever is on on Sunday, I'm actually happy when there's a Monday night opportunity. And the Thursday games tend to be pretty bad, but they sometimes aren't. So many people are just pleased when there's a football game on. So yeah, I mean, maybe there's some orphaning, but I think that there are some other reasons behind that.

Marijuana, I mean, look. I don't want to wade into the larger marijuana debate. But I do think that there's a lot of hypocrisy around Josh Gordon. Patriots player, had some terrible addiction problems, had played with the Cleveland Browns his whole career, didn't play because he was suspended-- sometimes just for marijuana. Testing positive for marijuana. Yeah, I know a lot of players smoke a lot. A lot of retired players smoke a lot of marijuana. And they do it for relaxation, for pain management. It's not dissimilar to a lot of other populations that use-- having a more open minded relationship to the drug.

So look, I don't think that there's-- I mean, I don't think it should be criminalized to the degree is inside the League. I don't think it should end the careers or hurt the careers that it does. But I think that's an ongoing debate there, as you see in other places, too.

AUDIENCE: Hi, my name is Archon Fung. I teach at the Kennedy School. A friend of mine is making this documentary in which he's kind of getting ordinary Democrats and Republicans to try to talk to one another. And one of the ice breaker questions was, what's the moment, kind of in recent years, where you felt the most down about America? And the Democrats, a couple of Democrats said, well, it was when Trump got elected that night. But then I was watching the Republicans and, like, two or three of them said, well, it's the football kneeling thing. That's when I felt most down.

And I thought, wow, I knew some people were unhappy about that. But the moment that's been most down about America? And so my question is, have you talked to some fans who are really upset about that? And can you help people in 02138, in this ZIP code, understand why that would be like the most down moment for America?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, it's a great question, especially in address to 02138. Which, for those of you, it's the ZIP code here. They still have ZIP codes, right? I mean, look, I think people saw it as a marker. People saw it as a much larger-- I mean, I think not unlike what you would see in the 60s, if people were growing their hair a certain length. I mean ultimately in the scheme of things, it wasn't that important. But symbolically, it was a huge sign that certain lines before were not going to be respected.

And I think if you look at the incredible despair that a lot of people in the country felt when Donald Trump was elected, it was a belief that like, this isn't supposed to happen. I mean, Donald Trump operates outside of a set of lines. OK? I mean, I didn't agree with Ronald Reagan, or I didn't agree with Barack Obama. But this was-- the center, in some ways, did hold. I knew what a conservative Republican president looked like.

I knew what a liberal Democratic president looked like. And then there's this. And I think that Donald Trump's election, and I think to some degree players not respecting the tradition of standing during the national anthem was emblematic of just lines of what was possible in this society, and the center not holding. And just sort of the idea that we are in a whole different context that we've never been before.

So I mean, that sounds like a much more abstract explanation for something that people felt very viscerally. I mean, I know a lot of people I know did. So, but no. I mean, I do think that people, especially on the coasts and the blue sort of 02138 America, and so much as that's a thing, underestimate, at their peril, the both symbolic but also the just offense that people will take to symbols of American tradition, and just sort of American respect, being what looks like it could be sort of glibly kind of disregarded. Just from someone trying to make a statement. So again, this isn't a new idea. But I think it's something we've seen with a great deal of urgency in the last few years.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Can I just ask a quick follow up on that?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Sure.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Do you also think that some of that angst about this being the lowest moment comes from those people feeling shocked, or unaware, or caught off guard that in fact, these people who are majority Black and brown have a very different vision of America than they do?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think, yeah. I mean, there's an incredible, slow journey to awareness for a lot of people. I mean, I think people are really dug in. I mean, you just don't-- I remember this viral thing last weekend, with the Covington High School kids, and the Make America Great Again hat. Where this Indian, Native leader was drumming. This was just this immediate Rorschach test. And like, you just-- I mean, part of it is that it played out on social media, and no one really listens to each other on social media.

But you just got a sense like, everyone is just talking past each other. And it's almost the sense I got when I was listening to the NFL owners talking to the sort of more socially aware players. No one was listening to each other. Everyone was just convinced at the outset that, what a bunch of imbeciles. I mean, he's wearing a Make America Great Again hat. I don't care if he's 16 years old. I'm not going to listen to him. I don't care about his perspective. I don't care if there's more to the story. And they would say, this is just a bunch of grievance identity politics. You know, dark skinned people. I'm not listening to them. I mean, it's just very-- it becomes very reductive, very, very quickly.

So I think, look, I don't-- I would hope that at the end of all of this, there is some kind of collective willingness to listen more closely than people do now. But look, I know us in the media, I mean, had this great reckoning about, what do we miss here? OK? We were surprised, or certainly my newsroom was surprised, by Donald Trump's election as anyone. And it's not

just that we're so much smarter than everyone else. I mean, we're missing something big here. And I think everyone sort of needs to realize that they're all missing something very, very big, on a side that they don't normally listen to.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: Can I jump in real quick and then we'll, like-- I just, on this point, which is, I think, part of the attitude that we haven't yet explored just to speak to is that, it's not just that folks looked at, say Kaepernick's kneeling and said, I don't want to see that you don't agree with my vision of things. There was definitely a thread through this. It continues to be a thread, directed at LeBron, directed at Kaepernick, directed at a lot of people. You have no place speaking to these things when you are a player.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah.

CHRIS ROBICHAUD: That's a strange view. And that seems to really surface something pretty ugly. Not just, I disagree with you. Not just, it's upsetting. But, who do you think you are to use this platform to make a statement? Particularly when the complaint against Kaepernick seems a bit, on the face, absurd. Insofar as in other contexts, people are like, why can't you do this peacefully? Why can't you do this respectfully? Why can't you do-- well, here's someone doing it peacefully and respectfully. And yet it's like, oh, well, that's fine. But you had no place doing it anyway.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. No, I mean, the players I got to know in doing it. I mean, Martellus Bennett, who played for the Patriots for a year. Very thoughtful, kind of outspoken guy who retired a couple of years ago. But he was saying-- he's got this really great podcast called Revenge of the Jocks out in LA, which I was on. It was about as fun a podcast I've ever done. So everyone should listen to Martellus Bennett's Revenge of the Jocks.

But he was saying that this is all part of the same dehumanization that we go through as athletes. I mean, playing football is a very dehumanizing experience, and Martellus is kind of a unique case. Because he didn't particularly like football, but he played it at a very high level, at a very lucrative rate, for 11 years. And he said that this is the same thing. No one wants to listen to what we, as human beings, think or say. I mean, they just want us to shut up and dance.

And that's a phrase that you hear a lot about, in the case of, what was it, Laura Ingraham, who said "shut up and dribble," being dismissive of LeBron James. Another guy I got to know, Eric Winston, who, long time lineman for a bunch of teams. But he's now president of the NFL Players Association. He retired from playing last year. But he would always talk about the shut up and dance ethic that they are all confronting. And look, I mean, it's offensive. But you don't hear the voice-- this has been given voice much more so than I had been aware of. So.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: OK. Over here.

AUDIENCE: Hello, my name is Eric Wilson. I'm a sophomore at the college. And I was wondering what, in your opinion, separates the NBA from the NFL in terms of handling difficult situations?

Specifically thinking about how the entire of the NBA handled the Donald Sterling and the Clippers situation.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, that's an interesting parallel. I mean, if there's one thing that drives Roger Goodell and the League and the NFL crazy, it's the unflattering comparisons they often get to the NBA. And the NBA is sort of seen as a league that kind of gets it a lot more. The commissioner Adam Silver is very popular. Players seem to love him, owners really like him, and he seems to have done a very good job.

Now, the Donald Sterling thing, for those of you who don't know, he's the longtime sort of just awful owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, who's, I guess, a mistress taped him saying all these racially awful things. And that came out, like, it was TMZ or something. It became public, and he just basically kicked him out of the league immediately. I mean, Adam Silver was in his first few months as commissioner, and it was a very popular, and actually frankly, very easy, but very kind of-- it was his first big move.

But no, the NBA is encouraging its players to speak up. Whenever there is a high profile shooting in a community, for instance, especially a police sort of brutality case. There was one in Sacramento a few years. The League encourages its players to have some kind of team protest. There has been a great deal of encouragement of LeBron James, and Kevin Durant, and Chris Paul, and a lot of very high profile players-- Steph Curry too-- to speak up. To be, we're going to help you. We're going to help you find places to amplify your voice. And if you run afoul of the president of the United States, we have your back.

I mean, that didn't happen in the NFL. I mean, the NFL just-- in addition to like a lot of the owners being Donald Trump supporters, they wanted nothing to do with taking a position here. They just, let's stick to football. And that to me is, I think, a fundamental divide between the two leagues, that I think has helped the NBA in terms of goodwill. Both among its ranks, but also among a lot of its fans. So.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: OK, over here.

AUDIENCE: Josh. Actually, kind of an interesting follow up to that. My thought is, you guys talked about the fact that the guaranteed contracts is one of the big things, and the clearing health. You talked about LeBron, and about those type of things. And the NBA is sort of leading the way in terms of-- LeBron's made this decision twice. There's sort of this player empowerment. Anthony Davis just basically is going to get to decide where he's going to go.

I'm wondering, is there any chance that that will trickle over to the NFL? Are we starting to maybe see that, with Kirk Cousins' contract? Three years, 75 million, that's pretty guaranteed. And is that something in the NFL that can be player led? Or is that something, because it's a different league, that has to get owner buy-in?

MARK LEIBOVICH: Yeah. I mean, I do think it's worth saying that the collective bargaining agreement in the NFL doesn't expressly forbid guaranteed contracts. I mean, basically, guaranteed contracts, or the lack of them in the League, is a norm. It's like, it's something that people have just grown accustomed to not having. So the Kirk Cousins contract, which is effectively a guaranteed contract that Kirk Cousins, the quarterback for used to be Washington, now Minnesota, he's guaranteed a salary. He might be someone who is going to sort of initiate a trend towards that.

But look, I mean, these players all know each other. They all talk to each other. And Steph Curry and Tom Brady are both, they know each other through Under Armor. A lot of them have the same agents, a lot of them work for the same-- athletes today, especially high profile successful athletes, have large entities that they work for. I mean, you could have 12 different organizations that pay your salary that you have some kind of infrastructure with. So, yeah.

I mean, I think, look, players pay attention more than you'd think. I think social media has been a democratizer in this way. It's certainly enabled people to be more outspoken, sometimes to their detriment, than they were before. So yeah. I mean, I think that there probably is going to be some overlap between the two leagues. And I mean, I think that based on a lot of the NFL people who talk about the NBA, it's a league that they would like to be able to learn from. But unfortunately, unless the owners and the commissioner are willing to learn from model organizations, it's not going to really happen that fast.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: So we have time for one more question. And it goes to you. No pressure, no pressure.

AUDIENCE: Good evening. I'm Jamie Lockhart. I'm a [INAUDIBLE] MBA student here at the Kennedy School, where the motto is, ask what you can do. And I'm curious what power you think fans have in all of this, to change the culture of the NFL. And what opportunity, other than a mass boycott or season ticket holders kind of revolting, what it would take fans to do for owners to listen and take action?

MARK LEIBOVICH: I mean, in a way, I mean, you answered your own question. Right? I mean, this is-- the owners of the league will talk about the vindication they get, year in and year out, week in and week out, by the marketplace. By the demand, by the ratings, and so forth. And look, I'm not going to call for a fan boycott in any way, shape, or form.

But I think the fact that the NFL has generated so much bad will in certain circles of the American culture, around political issues, around management and competence, around just botching some very, very serious and important issues. You have probably about seven or eight markets that is absolutely hostile to the National Football League, that Roger Goodell could not go into the middle of without extra security. I mean, whether it's Oakland, or now New Orleans. He's not the most popular guy in New England. San Diego, St. Louis. I mean, he's just like-- a lot of people across the country have a lot of bad will.

And look I-- I'm not, again, this is not a hill I personally am dying on. But I made the determination a couple of years ago that I'm not going to give the NFL any of my money. I used to do the Sunday ticket thing, so I could watch any game. And it cost a couple hundred bucks a year. And I just stopped doing that. Now, I'm not putting myself out there as this great social activist here. And besides, the Pats, who I like to watch, are usually on free TV in D.C. So I don't have to pay for it. So there is that.

But look, it is a pocketbook issue. And the only thing that the League really will pay attention to is bottom lines. And look, I mean, the Washington Redskins-- this is where I live-- have become a major problem for the National Football League. When I first moved to Washington 20 years ago, this was the marquee franchise. Not just in the league. Or one of the marquee franchises in the league, but certainly in Washington. And it was king.

And now they had like something like a 75% capacity rating, one of the lowest attendance rates in the league. They've really been surpassed by the Washington Nationals, the Washington Capitals-- I mean, well-run local sports enterprises. And look, I mean, the fact that the nation's capital football team has become an embarrassment, with a just despised owner within Washington and within the League, is a big problem for the League, in terms of goodwill.

So I guess as fans, you can just express your bad will in responsible ways. And if that includes spending your money a certain way, I mean, I think that can be very effective. So.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: All right, so this concludes our event and our panel for this evening.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Thank you.

LEAH WRIGHT RIGUEUR: Thank you all for coming. And thank you so much to Mark and to Chris for co moderating this event. And thank you so much for coming out into the Institute of Politics and the forum for hosting us. So thank you, and good night.

MARK LEIBOVICH: Thanks.

[MUSIC PLAYING]