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BEHIND NIKE'S DECISION TO STAND BY COLIN KAEPERNICK



By **Jelani Cobb** September 4, 2018

In July of 1988, Nike released the first of its ads under the slogan “Just Do It.” The spot featured Walt Stack, an eighty-year-old man, ebulliently trotting across the Golden Gate Bridge as part of his daily seventeen-mile run. “People ask me how I keep my teeth from chattering in the wintertime,” Stack says. “I leave them in my locker.” The same year, Nike released the first of a series of ads that paired the director Spike Lee with Michael Jordan, who was with the Chicago Bulls at the time. The wildly popular Spike-and-Mike ads didn’t fall under the rubric of “Just Do It,” but they were important to the Air Jordan line, which had been launched three years earlier, and went on to become the best-selling athletic shoe of all time. This was in spite of the fact that, two years later, Jordan was widely criticized for declining to endorse Harvey Gantt, an African-American Democrat challenging Jesse Helms, the race-baiting Republican incumbent, in a race for a U.S. Senate seat representing North Carolina, Jordan’s home state.

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That history stands as a curious preamble to Nike's decision to feature Colin Kaepernick, the erstwhile quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, who has not played professional football in nearly two years, as a face of the thirtieth-anniversary "Just Do It" campaign. This is partly about the prerogatives of success: in 1988, Nike was trying to reverse declining sales and was still building its standing in sports beyond track and field. In 2018, though domestic sales in the sports-goods industry have lagged recently, Nike is a globally dominant brand and a supplier of apparel to the same N.F.L. that has rejected Kaepernick since he decided to kneel during the national anthem at the start of a game, to protest injustice and police brutality. (Kaepernick filed a collusion grievance against the N.F.L., and the league requested a summary judgment; following an arbitrator's ruling, last week, it will go to trial. On Tuesday, in response to the ad, the N.F.L. released a statement that read, in part, "The social justice issues that Colin and other professional athletes have raised deserve our attention and action.") Nike's preëminence likely played a part in the calculations that led the company to feature someone as controversial as Kaepernick in the campaign. (Kaepernick has had a contract with the company since 2011, but it was on the verge of expiration when the company crafted an extension.) The ad, which Kaepernick tweeted out on Monday, shows a tightly framed image of his face, with the caption "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

Kaepernick's supporters hailed the ad for its boldness, but the negative reaction was swift and predictable. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Nike stock fell

nearly three per cent. On Twitter, irate critics posted images of burning Nike shoes—a cathartic move, perhaps, but an economically questionable one, given that those shoes were presumably paid for a long time ago. One meme features a photo of Pat Tillman, the former safety for the Arizona Cardinals, who quit football to join the Army after 9/11, and was killed in a friendly-fire incident in Afghanistan. The picture is paired with the caption from the Kaepernick ad. (Last year, in response to Donald Trump comparing Tillman with the kneeling football players, Tillman's widow, Marie, requested that his memory not be used in ways that are divisive.)

At the same time, Nike's decision isn't so much a defiant recognition of dissent as an acknowledgment of the directions in which sports culture has already travelled. In 1988, Nike promoted the image of a solitary senior citizen running on a bridge not, presumably, because it was looking to break into the octogenarian market but because it was hoping to sell inspiration. The company seems to have aligned itself with Kaepernick for the same reason. While some people rage that yet again in America an ingrate-rebel has been rewarded, there is another narrative that Kaepernick conjures—that of an individual, driven by conscience, fighting a lonely crusade against forces more powerful than he is. The odds are far from being in his favor, but, no matter, he persists. In this telling, Kaepernick the subversive is transformed into something more legible, more familiar—an American character whom Steinbeck might have imagined. Goliath has size and strength, but David is the one with the compelling story.

Improbably, Colin Kaepernick's social stature has only grown since his departure from the N.F.L. Last year, he was named *GQ's* Citizen of the Year, and, in April, he won Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award. During a time in which he never set foot on the field, his No. 7 jersey outsold those of most active players. Last week, Kaepernick and Eric Reid, his former teammate,

who participated in the initial protest with him, and who is also no longer in the league, received an ovation when they attended the U.S. Open. Serena Williams, who was playing her sister Venus at the time, said at a press conference after the game, “I think every athlete, every human, and definitely every African-American should be completely grateful and honored how Colin and Eric are doing so much more for the greater good.” Williams, a woman who has had to face racist and sexist attacks throughout her career, is also featured in the Nike campaign, as is LeBron James, the best basketball player in the world and a man whose intelligence the President of the United States has publicly insulted.

There was once a firewall that, at least in the eyes of the public, divided black athletes from the concerns of being black in the United States. That seemed to be how Michael Jordan felt, and also Charles Barkley, who, in 1993, during the siege years of crack and AIDS, said in a Nike ad that he was “not a role model.” That separation is no longer possible. The shoe burners feel that Nike has elevated a man of questionable motives and suspect patriotism. But their point is undermined by a different set of images and videos, detailing the final moments of Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and the nameless others who have died in similar circumstances. Nike gambled that a greater portion of the world understands where Kaepernick is coming from. At best, giants simply live up to expectations. Heroes need only live to tell the tale.



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Video

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