

# Richard Levick – The Bucks Stop Here



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When the Milwaukee Bucks boycotted game five of their NBA series against the Orlando Magic to protest police brutality, they took sports' biggest stand since Muhammad Ali – during the height of the Vietnam War – lost everything and was stripped of his boxing crown for announcing he was a conscientious objector and refusing induction into the U.S. Army in 1968.

It doesn't matter if you don't follow sports. The earth stood

still on August 26th. Already, in the wake of the Jacob Blake shooting, the NBA players have demanded and won from team owners the agreement to convert NBA arenas “into a voting location for the 2020 general election to allow for a safe in-person voting option for communities vulnerable to COVID.” This is enormously big and forever trespasses the line between sports and reality. However, if you have already looked away, you are making a mistake. There is another lesson and it is huge.

According to an analysis by Popular Information, the major sponsors of the NBA have also simultaneously made political donations of \$3.3 million to politicians rated “F” by the NAACP. Can you figure out what’s next?

Increased transparency, including obliterating the opaqueness of 527 political donations, means that companies that have historically donated to politicians independent of their brand but otherwise smart for business reasons are in for a reckoning. Brands and politics are no longer separate and the public linkage is accelerating at, well, an Olympic pace. The heretofore “smart” business strategy of donating to politicians either evenly across political parties or because of their sympathetic positions on corporate friendly legislation and taxation are going to find a much less friendly audience.

As Akerman partner Bill Ide and I wrote a few weeks ago, it is much more about *stakeholders* not *shareholders* now. It is also about seeing the world from another point of view.

A little over 20 years ago, when our firm was only a few years old and we were opening up a Los Angeles office, we flew a young woman just out of college, from Los Angeles to Washington, DC to join other new staff in a multi-day training program. Meals were involved, including a dinner with a number of senior staff and raw oysters were served. I didn’t notice it at the time, but this young, African American woman just

starting her first job and already intimidated by the former journalists, book authors and other industry luminaries at the table, found herself confronting her first raw oyster. How does one eat this crustacean? It is not a moment I remember, but it was a rite of passage for her and forever emblazoned on her memory. Growing up in a non-Kosher household, crustaceans were a gift from God as far as I was concerned, if that didn't damn me for life. But for this young woman it was just another in so many gateways of trying to succeed in a business world that was, and is, largely white.

Like most of us, despite our sensitivity, there are so many barriers we miss. This past week, **Christelyn Karazin**, the young staffer now nearly 23 years older and a book author herself, had me on her program, **The Pink Pill** which is about how African American women succeed in a world largely not of their own making. I was the first man and the first white man on her interactive program, which oversold virtually instantly and had a waiting list of people trying to get on an overwhelmed Zoom channel. I may not know much, but I know demand when I see it. It was as energizing as anything I have done in a COVID-Zoom world.

There's a world out there of people trying to get in. And though it takes courage on both ends, it can only make us better.

About a week earlier, I also had the honor of giving another **online speech**, this time to the University of Texas at Dallas Institute for Excellence in Corporate Governance. Similarly, a highly attended event, this one of board members from public and private companies, dealing with a myriad of challenges, one of them, of course, being Diversity, Equity & Inclusion. What struck me most about doing these two events back-to-back is that one is outside-looking-in and the other inside-looking-out. I know it sounds simple, but I think there is a magical opportunity here.

This is the sound of opportunity, where companies can lead this change, not react to it. One thing is for certain. You can hold on to the old way of doing business and making political donations. But the sound you just heard was the two-minute warning.

Enjoy the program.

**Watch the webinar**