

United States : On Kyrie Irving's Vaccine Refusal

Thursday 7 October 2021, by [ABDUL-JABBAR Kareem](#) (Date first published: 6 October 2021).

NBA great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar writes in *Jacobin* arguing that athletes like Kyrie Irving aren't making a "personal choice" by refusing the COVID vaccine — they're jeopardizing the public health of all through their platforms.

I'm a huge fan of LeBron James, both as one of the greatest basketball players ever and as a humanitarian who cares about social injustice. I have written his praises many times in the past and undoubtedly will in the future. I admire him and have affection for him. But this time, LeBron is just plain wrong — and his being wrong could be deadly, especially for the Black community.

After Golden State Warriors' Andrew Wiggins received criticism for refusing to get the COVID-19 vaccine for personal reasons, his teammate Draymond Green said the public needs to "honor" that decision: "There is something to be said for people's concerns about something that's being pressed so hard," he stated. "Why are you pressing this so hard? You have to honor people's feelings and their own personal beliefs." To which LeBron responded that he "couldn't have said it better myself." Actually, it couldn't have been said worse.

Wiggins has since received the vaccine, though he made clear that it was under financial duress. Other than vague claims about "freedom," he's never offered rational support for his stance. Neither has Brooklyn Nets point guard Kyrie Irving, who continues to reject the expertise of prominent immunologists without reason, contributing to vaccine hesitancy among people in the Black community, who are dying at twice the rate of white people. His lack of regard for Black lives doesn't deserve acceptance, nor does his lack of regard for the health and welfare of the NBA community.

On the surface, it appears that Draymond and LeBron are arguing for the American ideal of individual freedom of choice. But they offer no arguments in support of it, nor do they define the limits of when one person's choice is harmful to the community. They are merely shouting, "I'm for freedom." We're all for freedom, but not at the expense of others or if it damages the country. That's why we mandate seat belts, motorcycle helmets, car insurance, and education for our children. For example, seat belt compliance is at 88 percent in the United States, but that 12 percent that doesn't comply results in 47 percent of car accident fatalities (seventeen thousand) and costs US employers \$5 billion a year, and those costs are passed on to us. They made the choice, but we survivors are left to deal with the grief and the price tag.

The cost of COVID-19 for this country is difficult to measure. We can come up with a monetary amount: Harvard economists say it's cost us \$16 trillion so far — money that might have been spent to build the country, provide jobs, or help the disadvantaged. But the real cost is the seven hundred thousand lives, thousands of which could have been saved if they'd followed the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention protocols and gotten vaccinated. And thousands more are dying every day. Add to that the medical costs of those who will suffer for years from long-haul symptoms.

The only support for Draymond's statement is his belief that when people "press hard," there's something inherently wrong with their opinion. There is no logic to that statement. If I press hard against institutional racism, if I press hard against police brutality, if I press hard against recent laws making it harder for minorities to vote, if I press hard against child pornography, if I press hard in support of #MeToo, am I automatically wrong?

On the contrary, the passion of those urging vaccines might suggest that there's some urgency to their opinion. That the situation is serious and we need to take immediate action to protect people. That thousands are dying every day, mostly among the unvaccinated. That people in the Black community, where vaccine hesitancy is high, are dying at a disproportionately higher rate than white people. That publicly talking about honoring opinions that contribute to their deaths is irresponsible.

The country also mandates against drunk driving, "pressing hard" against the freedom to drive under the influence. We do that because drunk driving kills eleven thousand Americans every year and costs us more than \$44 billion. Vaccine deniers and those who want to "honor" them are like drunk drivers who are convinced they're okay to drive. When they make it home without an accident, that means they were right. Until they aren't. Which is why 97 percent of COVID deaths are among the unvaccinated.

And while some who don't get the vaccine might never get sick or, if they do, suffer mild symptoms, they are still potentially spreading the disease to others, killing some. While we're honoring the unvaccinated, COVID cases are rising alarmingly among young children.

I think of the situation like those old fire brigades, when people stood in a line, passing buckets of water to save their neighbor's house from burning to the ground. Maybe some people were afraid to join the line. But when the town leaders joined in, it encouraged others to do their duty. Today's celebrities and athletes are like those town leaders. You either join the line to save your neighbor's home, or you stand by and let it burn because you don't owe them anything.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

P.S.

• Jacobin. 10.06.2021:

https://jacobinmag.com/2021/10/kareem-abdul-jabbar-nba-basketball-covid-vaccine-kyrie-irving?mc_cid=658259d3fd&mc_eid=ed033bb17d

• Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is the NBA's all-time leading scorer. During his twenty seasons in the league, he won six league championships and MVP awards.