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OUR VIEW: MSU

Pullout from WCHA sensible move

The recent announcement that seven of the WCHA's 10 men's hockey teams were planning to exit the league and form their own may have offered little surprise, but it suggests a future for Minnesota State and other programs that could be a win-win.

Why it matters:

Division I hockey has become the premier sport and significant entertainment business for the Mankato region.

The seven teams announced a few weeks ago they were "exploring" starting another league. A follow up story by The Free Press showed they were doing more than "exploring" and had formally started the process to pull out of the league, following WCHA protocol.

In addition to MSU, teams bolting include Bowling Green, Northern Michigan, Michigan Tech, Bemidji State, Lake Superior State and Ferris State. Teams that remain would be both Alaska teams in Anchorage and Fairbanks and the University of Alabama-Huntsville.

A consultant for the seven teams said the group was moving "expeditiously" to form the new league. All systems appear to be go. WCHA Commissioner Bruce Robertson said the league was "disappointed" in the teams leaving but would move forward with process for withdrawal according to league bylaws.

If the league was putting up a fuss or opposed the move, it sure didn't show it. That makes us think the league was possibly attuned to the action and tacitly agreed it might be the best thing.

The Alaska teams downsized their budgets significantly, and the University of Alaska Anchorage went so far as to change its home venue from the city-owned Sullivan Arena to a rink on campus that does not hold the WCHA-required 2,500 people. Clearly Alaska Anchorage sees the writing on the wall as well.

The consultant for the new league, former St. Cloud State Athletic Director Morris Kurtz, described the new league as "elite" and one that would focus building rivalries within a "compact" geographic footprint. He also said the league would be unified by each school's commitment to financially supporting facilities and the programs.

This move raises the question of the Mavericks' application to the NCHC for membership a few years ago. That league was formed by the teams of the former WCHA that include powers like University of North Dakota, Denver, St. Cloud State and Colorado College. But it decided it would not expand at the time of the MSU application and so MSU was rebuffed.

The new league seems certain to incur some costs, and how that plays is just one of many of the questions left unanswered. We wonder if the Alaska teams and Alabama just withdrew from the league, the result of the new league would be the same but with the old WCHA structure and process.

Maybe the new league extracts more of a commitment from the schools in recruiting, facilities and coach's salaries than the old WCHA. If the league is to be truly "elite," it seems the financial commitment of all the schools would have to rise to the level of drawing the best talent.

These questions may be answered in the coming weeks or months. The NCHC still seemed like a more attractive option for MSU should it change its mind about expansion. But for now, it sounds like MSU is all in. Let's hope this move is a win-win for all the WCHA teams.

ROLL CALL VOTES ONLINE

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Votes are listed under "roll call votes" under the "news" accessed through the drop down menu at the top left of The Free Press home page.

Readers can find votes going back to 2011 on topics ranging from gun control to homeland security and from

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Votes for this year can be found by searching "How they voted" on www.mankatofreepress.com in the search bar on the home page.

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Checking up on Colin Kaepernick

All Americans have a stake in what becomes of a fellow citizen who encounters consequences for exercising our highly prized right to speak freely. So let's check on Colin Kaepernick.

Kaepernick is the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who chose to kneel during the national anthem before some National Football League games. Evidently it cost him his career.

This seems patently un-American. The right to express ourselves as we see fit regardless of what others think is fundamental. Whether you or I agree with Kaepernick is irrelevant.

In fact, the right to say and do what we want is so fundamental that I prefer to believe that it pre-dates and transcends the Constitution. It's just part of what it means to be an American.

But Kaepernick wasn't punished for what he did — kneeling — but, rather, for what he declined to do, standing for the anthem. It's a distinction worth noting. NFL owners, his fellow citizens and even the president of the United States demanded that Kaepernick act in a particular compliant way if he hoped to make a living in his chosen profession. As Trump put it, "Get that son of a b— off the field."

And evidently that's what the owners did. After Kaepernick left the 49ers in 2016, no other team would touch him, despite his credentials. Kaepernick filed a grievance alleging that the owners colluded to keep him out of the league.

In February Kaepernick reached a confidential settlement with the NFL. His financial award was probably considerable, but we do not know if it compensated him sufficiently for the loss of his career.

But other good things have happened to Kaepernick. Nike took a chance by making him a "brand ambassador" for their products, and the relationship appears to be mutually beneficial.

Kaepernick's influence at Nike is considerable. When he objected to the company's use of the so-called Betsy Ross flag on a sneaker designed for release on July 4, Nike pulled the shoe off the market.

Republicans exploded with outrage at Kaepernick and Nike for this putatively unpatriotic act. My senator, Ted Cruz, charged that Nike wants to sell sneakers only "to people who hate the American flag."

The Republican governor of Arizona, Doug Ducey, was so outraged that he withdrew a \$1 million incentive that had been available to encourage Nike to open a \$184 million plant in Goodyear, Ariz.

To Kaepernick, however, Betsy Ross's 13-star flag recalls the colonial era when slavery was part of the fabric of American life and racism was rampant, north and south. Many people's first reaction was that Kaepernick's position takes political correctness way too far.

But, as it turns out, reporting in the New York Times indicates that when the Ku Klux Klan began a recruiting

drive last summer in upstate New York, it distributed flyers that featured a mounted Klansman framed by two flags, the Confederate battle flag and the Betsy Ross 13-star flag.

So Kaepernick isn't the only one who associates that flag with an America that black people prefer not to glorify. And unless we're black ourselves, I'm not sure we have the right to dictate how black Americans should respond to that flag.

Finally, in other Kaepernick news, the National Republican Congressional Committee recently distributed an email fundraising ad that juxtaposed pictures of President Trump and Colin Kaepernick, with a caption that read: "WHO DO YOU STAND WITH? DONALD TRUMP AND THE BETSY ROSS FLAG OR ANTI-AMERICAN FLAG COLIN KAEPERNICK?"

The ad makes two points: The first is the clear association between the Betsy Ross flag and a vision of America that people of color have reason to fear. And, second, it attacks the patriotism of a fellow American based on his opinion.

I call this coercive patriotism. It finds its power in a peculiar combination of arrogance and insecurity. A dash of racism intensifies it. And it represents a greater threat to our republic than do a few individual citizens whose consciences lead them to speak in ways that we may not approve.

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Biden's crux of foreign policy

The most important element of Joe Biden's foreign-policy speech last week lay not in the details (which were thin) but in his embrace of one critical idea.

"The overarching purpose of our foreign policy," he said at City University of New York, must be to "defend and advance our security, prosperity, and democratic values that the United States stands for."

President Donald Trump's "failures to uphold basic democratic principles have muddled our reputation and our place in the world, and our ability to lead the world," Biden added. In other words, the greatest soft power America possesses — its post World War II status as the world's premier democracy — is being squandered, both at home and in Trump's interactions with allies and adversaries.

Whether or not you support Biden, I believe he has advanced the most critical foreign-policy issue of 2020: the urgent need to restore democratic norms at home and revive U.S. leadership of the "free world" abroad.

Let me be more specific. America's premier standing in the world over the last seven decades has relied heavily on admiration and respect for the success and functionality of its system and institutions, including from citizens and leaders of adversarial nations. It has always astonished me how many leaders of dictatorial regimes send their children to study here. China was already sending tens of thousands as far back as the 1980s.

So, when democratic norms are shredded within the USA, and vicious partisanship hobbles the U.S. Congress, the rest of the world takes keen notice. When President Trump gives a green light to racists, in Charlottesville, Va., and elsewhere, and cages asylum-seeking children at the border, they are startled. Over and over I have heard, in Europe, the Mideast,

and Asia over the last couple of years, the same question: "What has happened to your country?"

And when Trump began encouraging violence toward the mainstream media and denouncing journalists as "enemies of the people," my Russian journalist colleagues were astonished and dismayed at first. Now they take Trump rhetoric for granted and make clear that they assume U.S. democracy is on the way down,

just as Vladimir Putin says bluntly in public. That, they say, is the reason it's so easy for the Kremlin to meddle. So Trump's disdain for checks and balances and traditional democratic norms has sullied America's global reputation and the respect that adversaries pay.

Even more disturbing, Trump's disdain for democratic allies comes at a particularly dangerous moment in history, when global change is happening with incredible speed and intensity.

"Nations are more intertwined than they ever have been," Biden rightly said. The threats from climate change, nuclear proliferation, cyber warfare, and mass migration require the U.S. to lead the world's democracies on these issues, which would then increase the pressure on autocracies to behave better. Yet, "Donald Trump's brand of America First has too often led to America alone, making it much harder to mobilize others," said Biden. That has been true on every issue cited above.

Moreover, at this time of epochal global shifts, the idea and practice of democracy is under more pressure than at any point in our lifetimes.

China and Russia are openly promoting their authoritarian ideologies as an alternative to liberal democracy, which they claim is a failure. Extreme populist nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise around the globe, including, of course, in the USA.

Freedom House reports that of 41

countries ranked consistently free from 1985 to 2005, 22 have registered net declines in freedom over the last five years. Yet rather than rally and lead our democratic allies, says Biden rightly, "Trump seems to be on the other team."

"We are now entering an existential period of challenge for freedom and democracy in the world," says Larry Diamond, author of *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy From Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition and American Complacency*. "If you are Russia and China, your goal would be to simply have America withdraw from the contest. And that is the direction in which Trump seems to be headed."

The U.S. president constantly dumps on fellow democratic leaders but praises Putin, Xi Jinping, the Saudi monarchy, and mass murderer Kim Jong Un.

Whether a President Biden could reverse this devastating trend is subject matter for another column. His proposal for a global summit of democracies, whose leaders would focus on fighting authoritarianism and corruption is no panacea; something similar was tried before under President Bill Clinton. At minimum, it might focus attention on the threats to democracies that exit now.

However, at least Biden understands the criticality of making "democracy once again the watchword of U.S. foreign policy, not to launch some moral crusade (meaning no more efforts to impose democracy) but because it's in our enlightened self-interest."

"The United States must lead not just with the example of power, but the power of our example," he added. This is the message any Democratic candidate must promote.

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