

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly had a job to do today: Take the heat off the president for getting into trouble for something that no president before him has gotten into trouble before.

Donald Trump made a mess of a condolence phone call to the widow of La David Johnson. Today John Kelly made just as much of a mess. In his attempt to clean up Donald Trump's mess.

All indications are that the president made that condolence call after feeling the public pressure of a press conference where he was asked why he was silent almost two weeks about the death of Sergeant Johnson and three other army staff sergeants in Niger, Bryan Black, Jeremiah Johnson, Dustin Wright.

In the 12 days between the time those soldiers were killed in action and the president was first asked about them, the president found plenty of time to tweet his moral outrage at football players and he found time to tweet his outrage at Republicans, publicly defended Secretary of State Rex Tillerson after Tillerson was publicly quoted calling his boss, the President of the United States, a moron.

It was only when the news media publicly challenged the president in the Rose Garden the other day for not acknowledging the deaths of those soldiers in any way that the president made the phone call that got him in trouble.

Congresswoman Wilson, a friend of the family, who was present during the call, quoted the president as saying he knew what he was signing up for but I guess it hurts anyway. It wasn't just Congresswoman Wilson who thought that was an insensitive comment. Sergeant Johnson's mother then told the Washington Post, "President Trump did disrespect my son and daughter and also me and my husband."

And so, former Marine General John Kelly went into the White House press briefing room today to fix Donald Trump's problem. The recurring problem of appearing to have no empathy. The problem of being unable, publicly at least, to express any real sympathy for anyone except himself.

And so, John Kelly delivered a powerful public demonstration of real human feeling. Including the horror of his own loss of a son in combat in Afghanistan. A loss that John Kelly bears with dignity, grace and courage including the courage it takes to get through another day with the full knowledge that his other son is still in harm's way serving a fifth tour of duty in combat against ISIS right now. Few among us have the strength to bear what General Kelly and his family have to bear every day. General Kelly's comments today moved people in a way that nothing Donald Trump has ever said in his life could ever move anyone.

General Kelly did some of what he was supposed to do today. He did demonstrate empathy. But not for anyone who was not like him. His families only. And in particular, to Gold Star families, to families who have lost a soldier in their family like the Kelly family.

He showed no empathy at all for her. He talked about her a lot. He talked about her more than he talked about the president or his sons. And he never mentioned her name. He called her an empty barrel. He dehumanized her. In fact, from start to finish, John Kelly's comments in the briefing room today were essentially a lecture about his moral superiority over her. And Donald Trump's moral superiority over her. If there is anything that John Kelly respects about her, he did not mention it today.

Today, she was nothing but an empty barrel to him.

That's Congresswoman Frederica Wilson. She wears hats to honor her grandmother. That's why she wears them. She wants to keep her grandmother in her mind all the time. She was the first to publicize the president's phone call to Sergeant Johnson's widow. John Kelly had absolutely no empathy for Frederica Wilson today.

But they have more in common than John Kelly realizes. They were both born in segregated cities. They both went to segregated schools. She was born in Miami in 1942. When she was going to school in Florida, the schools were segregated by law. When John Kelly was going to school in Brighton in the Boston Irish neighborhood he grew up in, the schools were segregated by custom and practice and Boston segregation in the 1950s was as flawless as the legal segregation in Florida and the rest of the south.

John Kelly never saw Frederica Wilson in his neighborhood. The people of black people in his white neighborhood was the same language about black people that was used at that time in white communities in the segregated south.

I grew up a few years after John Kelly in an identical neighborhood on the other side of Boston and I went to high school in John Kelly's neighborhood. I know the neighborhood John Kelly comes from. I know the culture.

It was a neighborhood in which calling someone who looked like Frederica Wilson an empty barrel was the kindest thing that would have been said about her. Desegregation came very painfully to the Boston schools long after John Kelly finished high school.

And the pain of desegregating Boston schools was visited entirely upon the student that looked like Frederica Wilson and the stones thrown at the buses and the eggs thrown at Ted Denny's car because he supported desegregation came to the culture and no one was yelling empty barrel at the buses. High school students and their parents were screaming the worst possible racial epitaphs at those buses filled with black children. And John Kelly knows that.

Now, I didn't mind hearing John Kelly disagree with Congresswoman Wilson today. I understand the disagreement nature and some of it is deeply personal for him as a Gold Star father.

But I was stunned. Stunned when I watched him dehumanize her and very deliberately continue to dehumanize her and refuse to give her the dignity of a name and call her an empty barrel. He went out of his way to do it. It came after he had said everything he had to say about the phone call controversy. He was finished with that.

And then, he a long story, he told a long story that took place in 2015, two years ago, in Miami when he attended the dedication of a new FBI field office in miami, a field office that congresswoman wilson helped get the money for. John Kelly went into a long story about honoring FBI agents who had been killed in the line of duty there and he praised what he called the absolutely brilliant memorial speech that James Comey delivered that day in Miami. That's how far out of the way he had to go to get to this.

And Congresswoman Wilson stood up and in the long tradition of empty barrels making the most noise stood up there in all of that and talked about how she was instrumental in getting the funding for that building. She took care of the constituents because she got the money and called up President Obama and in that phone call he gave the money, the \$20 million to build the building. She sat down. And we were stunned. Stunned that she'd done it. Even for someone that is that empty a barrel. We were stunned.

That empty barrel. And I was stunned that John Kelly would so callously echo the worst part of the culture that he and I grew up in. Stunned. John Kelly and I have gone our separate ways in the world from our very similar beginnings in Boston Irish neighborhoods so we are stunned by different things. Here's more of what stuns John Kelly.

It stuns me that a member of Congress would have listened in on that conversation. Absolutely stuns me. And I thought at least that was sacred. You know? When I was a kid growing up things were sacred in our country. Women were sacred. Looked upon with great honor. That's obviously not the case anymore as we see from recent cases.

John Kelly began to slip into a bit of stream of consciousness about what was sacred. When he was a kid growing up. You know what wasn't sacred when he was a kid growing up where he was growing up? Black women or black people.

And, oh by the way, women were not sacred either. They were not honored. John Kelly's neighborhood in the Catholic parish he grew up and where I grew up, women were beaten by their husbands, drunken husbands as a normal weekly occurrence. And their parish priest would tell those women, you can't get divorced. Or you'll be ex-communicated. You are just going to have to bear it and bear it for the children. It's nothing you can do about it.

Women were not honored. Most women then were domestic servants and the women who had jobs outside of the home were not allowed to have most of the jobs in America at that time. They weren't allowed to work in most of the factories, they were not allowed to be police officers.

There were huge barriers of women to be doctors instead of nurses. Huge barriers of entry to be professors instead of elementary school teachers which is how Frederica Wilson began her work life.

She was an elementary school teacher and then elementary school principal and then elected to the school board and that's how she created a mentorship program for students like La David Johnson who she got to know when he was one of the kids in the mentorship program that she created as a member of the school board. When Frederica Wilson was little there were no women members of congress to follow into in that office.

When John Kelly was a little boy, everywhere looking in America there was someone like him at the top including a President of the United States who had the same initials as John F. Kelly showing 10-year-olds growing up in Boston even a Boston Irish kid could make it to the presidency and so today when John Kelly looked back on a world that never was, where women were sacred, he was standing in the White House occupied by the president that dishonored women, the only president in history who has confessed to sexual assault.

I just don't starting them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even -- when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the [ bleep ].

John Kelly stunned by that? Does John Kelly wash his hands after he shakes hands with Donald Trump? The hand that -- John Kelly's stream of consciousness about the loss of what is sacred in our society continued.

Life, the dignity of life, was sacred. That's gone. Religion. That seems to be gone, as well. Gold star families, I think that left in the convention over the summer. But I just thought the selfless devotion that brings a man or woman to die on the battlefield, I just thought that that might be sacred.

There's John Kelly saying that Gold Star families are not sacred anymore and saying I think that left in the convention over the summer. He seems to be complaining that the Khans spoke for one candidate and against another. John Kelly seems to be blaming the Khan family for Gold Star families by making political comments.

If that's not what he meant, we await his clarification. Or did he mean that he's ashamed that the president he works for attacked that Gold Star family? For speaking at a convention. That Donald Trump attacked Mr. and Mrs. Khan because they spoke out in a way that he did not like because if that's what John Kelly is outraged about then his outrage is well placed but John

Kelly who went out there to clarify the communication seems to have taken his own personal stance of moral superiority over another Gold Star family.

If that's not what he was doing, tell us that's not what he was doing. What John Kelly had to say today in defense of Donald Trump was barely coherent. Everything General Kelly said about the procedures that the military follows for soldiers killed in action was clear and instructive and deeply moving. And everything John Kelly said about his own experience of the loss of a son in combat and the continued service of another son in combat was nothing less than noble.

But when he attacked a Democratic congresswoman and defended a Republican president, he was purely partisan and he was not telling the truth.

There are many words that you can use for Donald Trump. The word brave has absolutely no application in the same sentence with the word Trump. And it dishonors any other use of the word brave that you might like to make if you use that word to describe Donald Trump. It was especially stunning coming from a military man who knows what brave is. Coming from a military man who has lived that bravery himself. Has risked his own life. Whose sons have served and lived that bravery. It was especially stunning for that word about Donald Trump. Brave.

General Kelly said he just explained to the president only three days ago how to make condolence calls, meaning he just explained to the president how to make condolence calls immediately after reporters asked the president why he had not made those four condolence calls.

So when I gave that explanation to our president three days ago, he elected to make phone calls in the case of the four young men who we lost in Niger at the earlier part of this month. But then he said, you know, how do you make these calls? If you're not in the family, if you've never worn the uniform, if you've never been in combat, you can't even imagine how to make that call. But I think he very bravely does make those calls.

Very bravely. Donald Trump. Here's something General Kelly said today about those condolence phone calls that we can all agree with.

If elect to call a family like this, it is about the most difficult thing you could imagine. There's no perfect way to make that phone call.

That was General Kelly today at his best. There's no perfect way to make that phone call.

But there is a way to fix what happened in that phone call but it involves something that Donald Trump has never done in his life. Apologize. Any decent human being would have picked up the phone call again and called Sergeant Johnson's widow again and apologized for any misunderstanding about his intentions in the first phone call. Donald Trump could have picked

up the phone between tweets about football players and explained to Sgt. Johnson's widow that he had heard the same words from General Kelly himself when General Kelly told the president about the most painful phone call that General Kelly ever received.

Let me tell you what my best friend, John Dunford, told me. He was my casualty officer. He said, kell, he was doing exactly what he wanted to do when he was killed. He knew what he was getting into by joining that 1%. He knew what the possibilities were. Because we're at war. And when he died, and the four cases we're talking about in Niger, my son's case in Afghanistan, when he died he was surrounded by the best men on this earth. His friends. That's what the president tried to say to four families the other day.

Then why not make another call and explain that? The president got it wrong with that family. And he's not the kind of guy to try again. And so, there was no apology phone call. Donald Trump's flawless, lifetime record of never apologizing remains perfectly intact and in the 12 minutes that general Kelly spoke today, he did not dispute a single word that congresswoman wilson quoted the president as saying and General Kelly did not dispute Sergeant Johnson's mother's statement, the president did disrespect my son and my daughter and also me and my husband.

John Kelly did not dispute one word of that and nowhere in his 12 minutes of speaking today did he apologize to Sergeant Johnson's family for any misunderstanding that might have occurred in that phone call.

But he took time, a lot of extra time, to call a black woman who he doesn't know and he doesn't like an empty barrel.