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Colin Kaepernick

Throughout history, professional athletes have used fame to publicly stand up for their beliefs. When one thinks of the Civil Rights Movement, names like Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and MLK Jr. might come to mind first; however, game-changers like Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, and Michael Jordan had just as much of a role in the movement. Because sports are such a huge part of American culture—for example, Super Bowl 50 had more views than any of the 2016 presidential debates—these figures have great impact on society (Super; Final). These figures are celebrities of a different brand: idolized, criticized, and living life in the public eye. Most recently, NFL player Colin Kaepernick gained the nation's attention with his own form of protest—refusing to stand for the national anthem. His actions prompted people far and wide to sound off. Reactions came from both supporters and opposers, which poses the question: was his behavior appropriate?

During the preseason, San Francisco 49er's quarterback Colin Kaepernick took his first step into controversy by sitting the bench as the Star-Spangled Banner played. His intentions were, as he stated in a post-game interview, "to stand up for people that are oppressed." He said,

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder (Wyche).

Kaepernick, who was drafted [second round] in 2011, lost his starting position last season. And, as he is recovering from injuries and surgeries, that position won't come back to him any time soon. He even appears to be more concerned with the racial issues he's fighting for than the football job he's fighting to keep: "If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right." Someone whose career is already on the rocks will experience no gain personal from causing such upset in the NFL universe. Those who dare to challenge the status quo do so out of a selfless desire to help the greater good. His intentions were pure, and he meant no insult to any person or group of persons. Some say he, as a well-off QB in the NFL, has no right to say he's been oppressed. But he stand (or lack thereof) was not for him. Bi-racial, he grew up with white adoptive parents, so he experienced racism first-hand, but his stand was for those who are still living in oppression (Colin). He personally might have beat the odds, but he is certainly an outlier.

Much of the initial backlash stemmed from the idea that the U.S. flag and its anthem solely represent the military, and by refusing to stand, Kaepernick was insulting their service to the country. Melissa Jacobs, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, says

What [people] fail to understand are the possible layers of thought when it comes to the anthem. You can sit for the anthem because you protest certain actions of your country, but still love it, and still respect the men and women who fight for its freedom...If you think about it, it's a fascinating exercise to join together with 80,000 other people and recite an ancient, honorary song about such an increasingly complex country. "The Star Spangled Banner", composed 50 years before slavery was abolished, should rightfully evoke different feelings in different people. Perhaps an immigrant appreciative of the better life America has afforded her family is sitting next to parents of an Iraqi War vet delighting in the freedom the military protects every day...The very reason the criticism that Kaepernick "disrespected the troops" is unfair is because his critics are projecting what the national anthem means to them. There is

no objective meaning of the anthem, and Kaepernick is perfectly legitimate in protesting what it means to him.

The military and the national anthem seem intertwined to Americans because the NFL has drilled the connection into their minds. The Defense Department funnels money into the organization, flyovers are common, and the military is honored at every game (Dublin; Carney). Jacobs recognizes that there's nothing wrong with honoring these brave men and women who deserve it so, but that it "does not mean those who are honored have ownership over patriotism and our anthem."

Retired Admiral Bill McRaven, the former head of U.S. Special Operations Command (who commanded the raid that killed Osama bin Laden), wrote that everyone "should recognize that by sitting in protest to the flag they are disrespecting everyone who sacrificed to make this country what it is today -- as imperfect as it might be" (Larter). In a memo to the presidents and athletic directors of The University of Texas System, of which he is chancellor, he said

I made it clear that honoring the flag does not imply that the republic for which it stands is perfect. I said "Far from it, honoring the flag is our collective commitment that we will constantly attempt to get better as a nation, to improve as a people, and to use the freedoms that we have been given to make the earth a better place."

However, in its 85 years as the official national anthem, it has never been deemed to stand just for the troops. It has, though, over the near-century it's been piped through crackling speakers and lip-synced at every sporting event ever, been watered down and lost its original effect. According to legend, after the Star-Spangled Banner was played during game one of the 1918 World Series, the crowd broke into thunderous applause and a deafening cheer, leading team after team to follow suit (Barbash).

Certainly, it must be taken into account that the country was at war during this time; many were on the battlefield instead of the ballfield, thus inciting deeper feelings of nationalism. Compare this, then, to the current state of the playing of our anthem. At any given game—little league, pro, or at any

level in between—there are those who do little else but stand still, continuing to use their phones or drink their beers as the song plays. Though most would deny it, many feel impatience as the music progresses, waiting for *...and the home of the brave* so that they can sit and watch the game. The more it is overplayed, the more it loses its meaning. The flag should stand for everyone who has fought for America—including those of the Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, and LGBT Rights movements. Dan Carney, of USA Today, says it best:

Many of the bravest living Americans never marched into combat, but did march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 in Alabama to demand justice for all Americans. Many of the people who made America great and its symbols worth standing for made their contributions far from the battlefield or the crime scene — in courtrooms, in schoolhouse steps, in boardrooms, laboratories and on shop floors. Some of them changed the world from their parents' garages or invented flight on the beach in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Making it clearer that the national anthem stands for those Americans just as much as for our uniformed defenders is vital to promoting a broader patriotism.

Many, including other NFL quarterbacks, acknowledge his right to speak out, and approve of his message, but disagree with his methods. “Like, it’s an oxymoron that you’re sitting down, disrespecting that flag that has given you the freedom to speak out,” New Orleans Saints QB Drew Brees said (Triplett). Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger said Kaepernick’s use of his platform to speak on hot topics is awesome, but that sitting during the national anthem stands for something else entirely. Athletes in other sports, like soccer’s Megan Rapinoe, have taken the opposite side.

I am disgusted with the way he has been treated and the fans and hatred he has received in all of this...It is overtly racist: “Stay in your place, black man.” Just didn’t feel right to me. We need a more substantive conversation around race relations and the way people of color are treated...We are not saying we are not one the greatest countries in world. Just need to accept

that [it is] not perfect, things are broken...And quite honestly, being gay, I have stood with my hand over my heart during the national anthem and felt like I haven't had my liberties protected, so I can absolutely sympathize with that feeling.

Those like Rapinoe say, in so many words, that he is using the flag for its intended purpose. It represents the First Amendment—the freedom of speech. It stands for a country that is constantly changing for the good of its people, and it gives those people the chance to incite that change.

McRaven's memo continues to say, "It is a flag for everyone, of every color, of every race, of every creed, and every orientation, but the privilege of living under this flag does not come without cost. Nor should it come without respect." McRaven is contradicting himself by saying that the flag and its honor does not belong solely to the military. While this should be accurate by now, Kaepernick protests because, in his belief, it is not a flag for everyone. It is fairly easy to see where he's coming from: the names Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and many others carry significant weight, adding to the growing "Black Lives Matter" movement. Kaepernick and sympathizers see police brutality and racial profiling as real, self-evident issues. According to mappingpoliceviolence.org, more than 100 unarmed black men were killed by police in 2015, and at least 230 have been killed so far in 2016. However, they are not without disagreeers. A Harvard study disproved the notion that racial bias in police shootings exists (Fryer). According to Kelly Riddell at *The Washington Times*, the Black Lives Matter movement promotes lies and is simply propaganda. The movement, she says, ignores black-on-black crime, and that almost all of the 6,095 black homicide victims in 2014 had black killers. She says black neighborhoods are "crime-ridden," and "...are getting policed, because they need to be policed."

The main issue with those who take offense to Kaepernick's actions is their refusal to see race as an issue. Not surprisingly, these dissenters are overwhelmingly white. Typically, those who are not

hindered by their skin tone are not quick to see the struggles of those with more melanin. Nate Boyer, a former Green Beret, is a welcome anomaly. In an open letter to Kaepernick, he said:

I'm not judging you for standing up for what you believe in. It's your inalienable right. What you are doing takes a lot of courage, and I'd be lying if I said I knew what it was like to walk around in your shoes. I've never had to deal with prejudice because of the color of my skin, and for me to say I can relate to what you've gone through is as ignorant as someone who's never been in a combat zone telling me they understand what it's like to go to war.

He spoke of his own pride in the anthem and the flag and how it feels, coming from someone who actually fought for that very flag. He managed to convince Kaepernick to kneel rather than sit during the anthem, mostly through a personal story about his experience playing for the Denver Broncos. He said it would have hurt him, through all his excitement, to see a teammate sitting on that bench as the anthem played and tears welled up in his eyes. But he respected Kaepernick's right to protest, and in his letter, he said "I look forward to the day you're inspired to once again stand during our national anthem. I'll be standing right there next to you."

Colin Kaepernick, for better or for worse, has become a public figure in the move towards equal rights. There are those who agree with his message and method, one but not the other, and those who reject both. Kaepernick, though, was well within his rights when he didn't stand for the playing of the anthem. He was exercising his First Amendment right to free speech—one that can't be taken away by those who disagree. And he can't, by any means, be accused of disrespecting the armed forces. The connection between the anthem and the military only exists because the military has paid the NFL for it to be so. Ideally, the flag waves to represent all people of the United States of America, and the freedom fighters—Kaepernick, King, Parks, Ali, Jordan, Robinson, and others included, not just those in uniform—do/did what they do/did to move towards a country that matches that ideology. Kaepernick's action was entirely appropriate for his intent, but will it prove effective?

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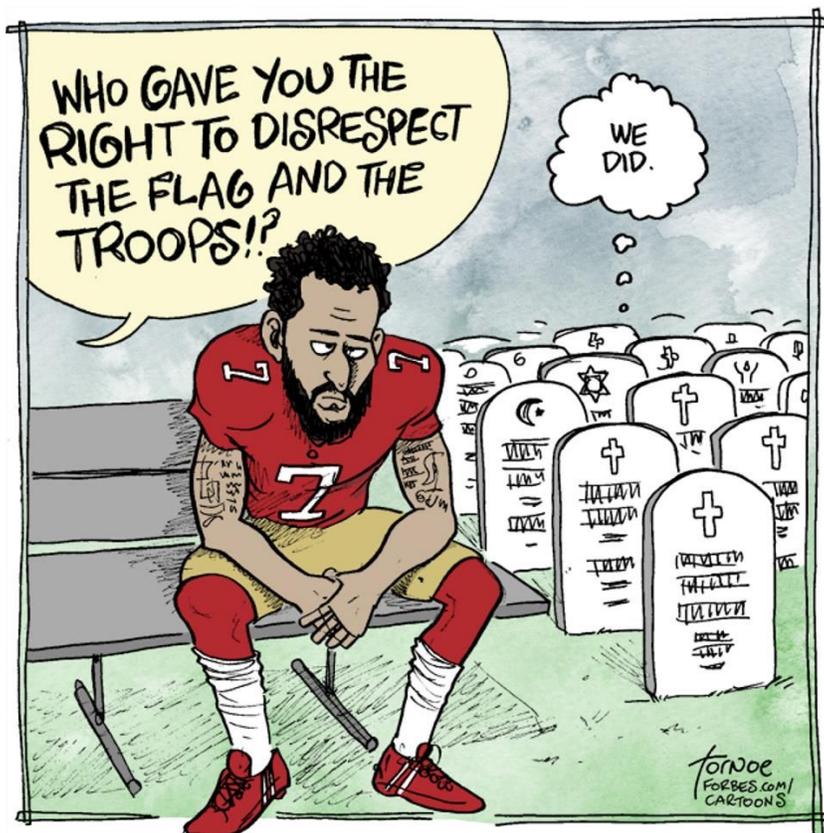
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