



Star-Spangled Protest

Why an athlete's refusal to stand for the national anthem has sparked such intense debate

BY CARL STOFFERS

When the national anthem played before an NFL preseason game in August, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick remained seated on the sidelines instead of standing like almost everyone else in the stadium.

Kaepernick expected some criticism for his protest—carried out, he said, to call attention to police brutality and racial injustice in the U.S.—but what followed was a firestorm. Many accused him of thumbing his nose at America by not joining in a patriotic ritual that's long been a fixture at sporting events.

"There's ways to make change w/o disrespecting & bringing shame to the very country & family who afforded you so many blessings," read one of thou-

sands of angry tweets. It came from Kaepernick's biological mother, Heidi Russo, who gave him up for adoption as a child.

Others praised him for taking a principled stand, and even President Obama seemed to sympathize. "I think he cares about some real legitimate issues that have to be talked about," Obama said during a press conference while visiting China.

The debate over Kaepernick's actions raises two questions: How did the national anthem become so integral to organized sports, and why do Americans have such strong feelings about it? It's part of our national religion to believe in the flag and Betsy Ross and the national anthem, says Chris Stam, professor of cultural anthropology at Duke

Watch a video of President Obama's reaction to Kaepernick's protest at upfrontmagazine.com

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period of intense patriotism that swept the nation during World War II (1939-45). Pat Courtney, a spokesman for Major League Baseball, said that the national anthem has been performed before all MLB games since 1942 and that "it remains an important tradition that has great meaning for our fans."

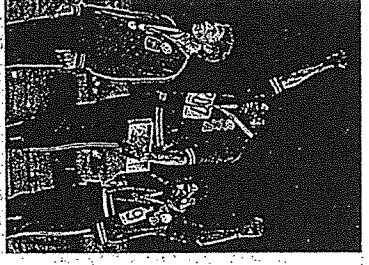
Other sports also incorporated the song into their pregame rituals. Today all four major sports leagues ask fans and players to stand and remove their hats while the anthem plays. But no league does it with more pomp and circumstance than the NFL, which often stages elaborate displays featuring a giant flag and jet-fighter flyovers.

An American Tradition
Most other countries don't have similar rituals. For example, national anthems aren't typically played before Japanese baseball games or German hockey games. Why the difference? According to Stam, it probably lies in America's history.

Unlike most nations, the U.S. wasn't created on a common platform of religion or ancestry. Instead, Americans are bound by ideas and concepts—that all people are created equal, for example—and something that represents those ideas, like an anthem, can come to seem vitally important, even sacred.

"We're the most sports-obsessed society in the history of the world, and we're also a nation that's obsessed with patriotism and pride in its identity," Stam says. "You can't be a politician who doesn't wear a flag lapel pin, and you can't go to an NFL game and not hear the anthem."

Kaepernick isn't the first athlete to be criticized for skipping the anthem, whether intentionally or not. In 1966, U.S. sprinter Tommie Smith and John Carlos were expelled from the Olympics in Mexico City for raising gloved fists in a "black power" salute while on the medal stand during the playing of the national anthem. Mahmoud Abdul-Jabbar of the Denver Nuggets was suspended by the NBA in 1996 for refusing to stand during the anthem. And at the Rio Olympics this summer, gold medal gymnast Gabby



1968 Olympics: American sprinters Tommie Smith (center) and John Carlos (right)

Douglas was lambasted on social media for not placing her hand over her heart while the anthem played—even after she explained that as a member of a military family, she had learned to stand with arms at her sides.

Given how strongly many Americans feel about the anthem, it's not surprising that protesters like Kaepernick's have been

The National Anthem & Slavery

Does 'The Star-Spangled Banner' have a pro-slavery/messager?

One of the debates I joined by Colin Kaepernick's protest involves the nature of 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' the national anthem. The song's lyrics are a pro-slavery ode to the British navy's victory over the American navy in the Battle of Fort Mifflin in 1794. The lyrics celebrate the British as 'freedom's true friends' and the American navy as 'tyrants' who 'oppress'd our shores.' The lyrics also mention 'the foe' and 'the foe's' 'tyrants' who 'oppress'd our shores.' The lyrics also mention 'the foe' and 'the foe's' 'tyrants' who 'oppress'd our shores.'

Some say that Francis Scott Key's words express grief over the death of slaves who sought freedom by joining the British. Others say that Key's words express grief over the death of slaves who sought freedom by joining the British. Others say that Key's words express grief over the death of slaves who sought freedom by joining the British.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For use with the article on p. 8 of the magazine



STAR-SPANGLED PROTEST
Analyze the Article

1. What issues did Colin Kaepernick hope to call attention to by not standing during the national anthem?
2. According to professor Starn, why do Americans have strong feelings about the national anthem?
3. During what historic event did the national anthem become a fixture at Major League Baseball games?
4. Do you agree or disagree with Kaepernick's protest? Why?

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