

# Star-Spangled PROTEST

**W**hen 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 thousands of tweets. "When the national anthem is played, these national symbols are called into question, it makes people angry."

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 Onin Siam, professor of cultural anthropology at Duke

Watch a video of President Obama's reaction to Kaepernick's protest at [upfrontmagazine.com](http://upfrontmagazine.com)

8 | The New York Times | UPFRONT • UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

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.

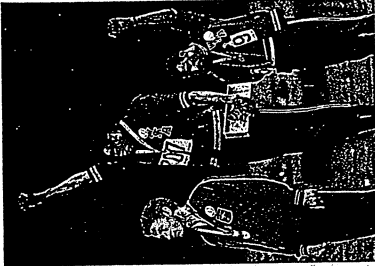
## An American Tradition

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 Starn, 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 identity," Starn 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 slighting the anthem, whether intentionally or not. In 1968, U.S. sprinters 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 Aboul-Rauf 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 protests like Kaepernick's have been

relatively rare. When he repeated the protest during a second preseason game, however, he was joined by a teammate. And during the first week of the NFL season, players from several teams chose to kneel or raise fists during the anthem. In early September, Megan Rapinoe, an American soccer player, knelt during the anthem before a women's pro soccer league game in support of Kaepernick.

Following his second protest, the 49ers announced that Kaepernick had lost the starting quarterback job to Blaine Gabbert. The team said the decision was based solely on performance, but others wondered whether Kaepernick had been harmed by the outcry over his actions.

"It's the step off the cliff that most athletes aren't going to take," says Starn. "You might have Lebron James wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt, but the national anthem has always seemed sacred, and you would just put your hand over your heart and stand up like everyone else."

With reporting by Sam Border of The Times.

## The National Anthem & Slavery

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

One of the debates fueled by Colin Kaepernick's protest involves the nature of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' itself: Does it celebrate slavery? The early song includes the line: "No refuge could save the hireling and slave From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave." The lyric refers to Britain's promise of freedom to escaped U.S. slaves who fought for England during the War of 1812: Hundreds joined a regiment called the Colonial Marines that fought in several battles, according to Mark Clague, a musicologist at the University of Michigan who's writing a book about the anthem.

Some say that Francis Scott Key's words express glee over the death of slaves who sought freedom by joining the British, which had become a strong ally of the United States. "By the early 20th century, most music omitted the entire third stanza of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' out of fear of offending Britain, which had become a strong U.S. ally. Only the first stanza is commonly sung today."

Others say that over-simplifies history. They point to Key's complicated relationship with blacks—he was a slave owner, but as a lawyer he voluntarily defended slaves in court—as evidence that there's more to the lyric and the man. "There were blacks and whites fighting on both sides," says Clague. "Key's lyric celebrates the heroism of the escaped slaves and other African Americans who were on the American side. I don't think it's racist or makes a distinction on race. It think it vilifies slaves: Colonial Marines, and British mercenaries. It's about the enemy."

Francis Scott Key, the author of the national anthem, is depicted in a portrait. The image shows him from the chest up, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the viewer.