

"TO KNEEL, OR NOT TO KNEEL," THAT IS THE QUESTION

Thursday

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Colin Kaepernick, starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, recently made the decision not to stand during the singing of the national anthem. When asked about his decision to "take a knee," he said it was because he was trying to show support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement, his way of shining a national spotlight on what's being called a systematic pattern of racism in the nation's police force. Putting aside, for the moment, the accuracy of these accusations, the argument now concerns his chosen method of showing support.

A democratic system of government stands absolutely zero chances of success if it doesn't also include the right to freedom of speech. As I see it, the right to freedom of speech includes two core components. The first is the right to express a contrary opinion, no matter how reprehensible it might seem to others. Without being able to express your difference of opinion, free from censorship or retaliation, the right to speak is absolutely meaningless. The more opposed your position, the more vile your position, the more meaningful your right to speak out becomes, and for good reason, as history has proven, time and time again.

The second core component includes the right to protest, to stand up in the streets as a group, and voice your opinion. Without it, you're just a lone voice, unless you're expressing an opposing opinion, in which case you're a lunatic.

Having determined that citizens in a democratic country possess both the right to express even the most vile of opinions, and in a public forum, the only question remains on how these rights can be expressed. With the ever increasing, and availability, of the Internet, many choose to express themselves from the comfort (and safety) of their homes, others choose to wear ironic t-shirts or even by their decisions during the election process. Perhaps the most frequently used method, however, involves the right to assemble in a public place, with others of a like mind, in the hopes of showing just how popular your opposing views have become. Some, however, believe that the more offensive the manner chosen to express yourself, the more attention it's going to receive, and therefore, the more seriously it's going to be taken. Colin Kaepernick appears to have chosen the latter, expressing himself in what many see as blatant disrespect, not only to the country which gave him his rights to freedom of speech, but also the men who fought and died to guarantee that right.

Let's be clear: there's no law on the books which says Kaepernick must stand during the singing of the national anthem, and if there was, it would most certainly be against both the letter, and the spirit, of our first amendment, which guarantees the right to free speech. However, just because it's not illegal doesn't mean it's right. Standing during the singing of the national anthem is meant to show respect for the home country. Attend a sporting event on foreign soil, and you'll stand, not because you share the beliefs of that country, but because you're trying to show respect to your host, just as foreigners will stand during the national anthem while in our country.

While it's true that Kaepernick's conduct is protected speech, it's just as true that his actions are being taken as contempt, and even disrespect, for not only the country, but also the men who sacrificed their lives to give him that right. But there's another factor people are overlooking when Kaepernick refuses to stand. By choosing a manner of protest universally viewed as disrespectful to an entire nation, what Kaepernick's really doing is accusing everyone in this country of being a part of the problem he's protesting against, and nothing could be further from the truth. Most people are completely in support of reducing incidents of police brutality, even people like myself, people who believe that most acts aren't related to racism, but instead have more to do with corruption, but when he refuses to stand, I can't help but feel that he's also accusing me.

It's his right to refuse to stand during the singing of the national anthem. As I said earlier, the more offensive a person's point-of-view, the more protected his speech should be, but keep in mind that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. While it's true that arresting him for exercising his right to express himself might not be permissible in a democratic society, this doesn't mean I have to support his decision. In fact, the thing I love most about this country is the fact that I'm every bit as free to express myself in response to his, or anyone else's view, a fact which didn't go overlooked by the authorities in San Francisco. So, when they tried to hire off duty officers to provide security during the 49ers home games, most refused, saying that they'd continue to refuse until he started showing proper respect for the country.

Personally, I think that taking a knee during the singing of the national anthem or even burning your country's flag can be the most profound acts of free speech imaginable, but there's a time and a place for everything, and more importantly, a reason. This is neither the time, nor the place, and this certainly isn't a legitimate reason. Save your acts of contempt towards the country for when your nation does something contemptible. For instance, if you woke up tomorrow morning to find out that your country authorized military force to defend another country's decision to authorize slavery, then by all means, refuse to stand during the singing of the national anthem, or burn a flag in the middle of the street. After all, your nation just did something worthy of contempt, and it's your country's official policy you're protesting against, but to choose this reason to disrespect your country, and everyone in it, is something I simply refuse to support.

In looking for a solution, I'm reminded of something my mother used to tell me as a child, "if you want to live under my roof, then you'll live by my rules." While public entities might not have the authority to mandate standing or otherwise showing respect during the singing of the national anthem, the NFL isn't a public entity. It's a private business, and therefore, capable of making, and enforcing, its own rules and regulations. If the commissioner doesn't want to create any controversy by forcing the employees of the NFL to stand during the singing of the national anthem, then why not simply ban those people from entering the stadium until the anthem has been sung? A simple solution, wouldn't you say?

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