

# Anthem Protests Obscure Any Legitimate Grievances

by Conrad Black



The problem in the NFL controversy is that demonstrative players and the president are both making legitimate points. In the players case, the issue is the chosen form of expression.

Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback of the San Francisco Forty-Niners started the practice of remaining seated while the national anthem is being played at the start of National Football League games. Kaepernick said: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a country that oppresses black people and people of color." He later changed from sitting to kneeling in silence, out of respect for past and current members of the United States armed forces. The United States officially and strenuously opposes the oppression of any American for racial reasons. The fact that racially motivated crimes and misdeeds occur in the United States, a country of over 323 million people, does not justify impugning the value,

respectability, or entitlement to the patriotic devotion of its citizens to the country. In implying that the United States as an entire entity is devalued by any crimes, and that what Kaepernick describes as “systemic racism” is officially or generally condoned, is unjust and very offensive to the majority of Americans. And, naturally, it is offensive to the president.

To use current parlance, the gesture is disproportionate. Any act of racial oppression is an outrage, but the rightful and appropriate protest should not impugn the integrity of the entire country, which such a clear gesture of disrespect for the National Anthem and flag very deliberately and provocatively does. Kaepernick’s gesture and that of those who have joined this trend is apparently a protest against racism, but only racism directed against black Americans.

No sane person would dispute that black lives matter, but Americans of color are not the only victims of injustice in the country. Though the measurable injustices inflicted on African-Americans are certainly more numerous than the proportion of the whole population that blacks represent, all lives matter and all racially motivated acts of oppression offend, dishonor, and sadden almost everyone in the country.

By this very conspicuous withholding of customary respect for the country’s anthem and flag, the Kaepernick movement is displaying a form of implicit racism, by inciting the inference that only the lives of non-white people matter, and only they are oppressed in the U.S., and that only Blacks care about crimes against Blacks. If that were true, or if there were any significant body of opinion that subscribed to such a view, the consensus of citizenship and national attachment, which is the basis of civic cohesion and the national ethos of every advanced country, would be undermined.

There are certainly less provocative methods, and gestures less offensive and insulting to most Americans, to make the

point than kneeling silently during the National Anthem at great sporting events. President Trump has said repeatedly that his objections to the Kaepernick treatment of the National Anthem have nothing to do with racism, only with respect for the country and its symbols. To him, and to those who agree with him in this controversy, (64 per cent of the country according to the only poll I have seen), those who withhold normal respect for the anthem and flag are expressing their grievances in a way that unjustly offends the tolerant and conciliatory majority. Most Americans support even justice for everyone and deplore racism.

This controversy is the logical and nasty result of the long pursuit of identity politics, mainly by Democrats. The country has been atomized into smaller and smaller constituencies, pandering to each in the approximate order of the militancy of their grievances. This process, after a point, operates at the expense of the spirit of national unity and a common cause for all to make America better. It is understandable that the president sees these acts of rank disrespect to the country and all who believe in the country despite its faults, as offensive. He and all of civilized America are in common cause with Kaepernick and his followers in deploring racist oppression, but protesting it by slagging off the anthem and flag alienates the majority of Americans who would otherwise be on Kaepernick's side. It is not surprising or unreasonable that Trump and millions of others find the spectacle of a few people with huge incomes for very short work-years, putting on the airs, not only of martyrs, but of martyrs claiming they represent the only wronged people in the country.

Add to that the spectacle of some of the NFL franchise owners, almost all white billionaires, engaging in acts of solidarity with the minority of players who emulate Kaepernick, and it does become an implausible scene. The team-owners are presumably law-abiding and racially tolerant people. But their antics more closely resemble those of the frightened rich

masquerading as pro-minority activists to protect the value of their great asset-an NFL franchise. It is somewhat like craven presidents of universities endlessly capitulating to militant student groups. (This contemptible practice is widespread but really began in the Vietnam era: California's Clark Kerr, Columbia's Grayson Kirk, and Harvard's Nathan Pusey come to mind.)

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