

# The National Anthem

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - The National Anthem  
SEPTEMBER 4, 2016

It has been over a week now since Colin Kaepernick sat during the playing of the National Anthem prior to an NFL Exhibition game. He was protesting discrimination against African Americans and police brutality in the United States. These issues have been in the forefront of public discussion since the shooting of Michael Brown just over two years ago. At various points and venues since the Brown shooting athletes have protested and offered various forms of support directly and indirectly to the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Kaepernick's action joins a long list of protests, and as has often been the case, Kaepernick has set off a wave of noise that has done little to stimulate the discussion of the subject under protest.

What has followed Kaepernick's action has been massive public criticism of the 49ers quarterback for the act of sitting during the national anthem. Critics have in turn denounced him for disrespecting the flag, attacking the police, and insulting the military especially those who have been casualties in what has turned into our state of perpetual undeclared war. He has been criticized for being an ungrateful athlete who has made millions from his football skills, for assuming that anyone wants to hear from a mediocre player on any subject, and for being an African-American who has the nerve to speak publicly on matters of social concern.

Protests involving the national anthem and the flag have a long history and I don't want to recapitulate the details of that history here. The playing of the national anthem at sporting events in the United States goes back a century of more,

although the playing of the anthem before any and all sporting events dates back to World War II. The practice did not end when the war ended and it became permanent with the coming of the Cold War. It is now a requirement rather than a special practice. It is of interest to many that the United States is the only country in the world that uses its national anthem to introduce its sports events.

What interests me about the current uproar over Colin Kaepernick's action is the intensity and volume of the reaction, and the notions of what his action represents. As a starting point it might be useful to think about what the anthem represents and what the flag represents. Does the anthem represent the flag? By protesting during the anthem is this an attack on the flag? How so? Or does the National Anthem represent the nation or perhaps the values and ideals of the nation?

As to the flag, what does it represent? As with the anthem for many it represents the ideals and values of the nation. It is a symbol of those ideals and values. It is not the nation, but a symbol of it. It is not the military, it is not the police, it is not veterans who have served the nation, nor is it those who have served the nation in any other number of ways. It is a symbol of all of these collectively and the ideals and values they hold as a community.

For as long as I can remember, roughly the past sixty-five years, when I went to a sports event and the anthem was played it was a community exercise of commitment to our shared values. The fact that most people in the arena or stadium didn't know the words really didn't seem to matter.

For the two years I lived outside the United States the anthem was a reminder of the United States and all the best that it represents. When I returned to the United States and heard it played for the first time in a public setting it was a special moment. During all of this time it never occurred to me that somehow the anthem was to be equated with the flag, military personnel, police, or authority figures of any sort.

As the era of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war played itself out, it seemed quite natural that the National Anthem might be an object of protest highlighting the shortcomings of the nation, especially its failure to live up to its ideals. The protests by Smith and Carlos at Mexico City, or even the Jimi Hendrix version of the anthem, seemed to me to be an excellent forum and form of protest. People were angered by these protests, but the level of vitriol that we have seen in the past ten days seems to me to be much greater and much broader than in the past.

So what has changed over the last two or three decades in reference to the national anthem and its connections to sport? First, I would point to the ways in which sports organizations have sought to tie themselves to flag waving patriotism. It has been the National Football League that has taken leadership in this practice and others have followed. In pre-game activities the use of flyovers, the size and number of flags on display, the honoring of veterans and indeed the exploitation of veterans and their families has been shameless, and it is growing with each and every season.

There have always been connections made between sport and the military including the idea that sport is a way of preparing

young men for war. It has also been seen as a substitute for war, or as William James suggested "A Moral Equivalent of War." What is new, I think, is that the sporting culture in America, and perhaps elsewhere, has been militarized and in the process the flag and the anthem have been tied to the military in very direct ways. This has pushed aside the symbolic functions of both flag and anthem and made them a vehicle of aggressive patriotism and nationalism.

Perhaps it is time to step back and suspend the practice of playing the anthem at the start of our sports events, and try to think about what this practice means. Even more important it would give the nation time to talk about its values and ideals, as well as the accomplishments and shortcomings in achieving them.

As to Colin Kaepernick's or anyone's right to protest, that is one of the basic and fundamental values of the nation. Let's celebrate that!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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