Standing Up For Justice by Kneeling Down

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “Silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly” (Gandhi). Standing up to injustice is never an easy thing to do, but when occasion demands action to be taken, then it is necessary.

Recently, Colin Kaepernick, a former NFL Quarterback, and many other athletes have taken a knee during the national anthem in response to police violence against African Americans. Many have criticized these actions, calling the athletes unpatriotic and disrespectful to the flag. However, these critics fail to take into account the values, such as freedom of speech, that stand behind the flag, the reasoning behind these protests and the potential changes that could come from these actions. The whole picture, when looked at, reveals how these athletes are actually honoring the flag by speaking up for the morals that it represents.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution clearly guarantees freedom of speech. It states that the people have a right to freely express their opinions. A Supreme Court case called “West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette” is a perfect example of this. The case surrounded a 1942 West Virginia rule that required children to salute the US flag. Walter Barnette, a Jehovah’s Witness, sued the state over this rule on the grounds of religious discrimination and won. The court ruled that “compelling children in public schools to salute the U.S. flag was an unconstitutional violation of their freedom of speech and religion.” (“West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette.”). This shows that it is unconstitutional to try to
require people to stand up for the flag and salute it. Kaepernick, in his actions, was simply exercising his rights. It is his basic right as an American to be able to act as he pleases before the flag, whether he chooses to kneel, sit, stand or turn his back, he has free will to make that choice. It is unconstitutional to try to suppress his freedom of speech, even if some might find the actions offensive or disrespectful. Another example of this is the “Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District” Supreme Court Case. This case was surrounding a few students who wore black armbands to school in protest of the Vietnam War and were suspended for it. The parents argued that the school had violated their children’s right to free speech and the court ruled that “students don't shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gates” (qtd. in D. Ellis 1). Similarly, Colin Kaepernick doesn't shed his constitutional rights at the entrance of the football field. Constitutional rights aren't circumstantial to location, career or whether or not there is a crowd of people watching. And if certain people are offended by Kaepernick’s actions, then that is their right. However, they must also acknowledge that if they get to express their opinion, then so does he and so does every other American who lives under the values of the Constitution.

When looking at Kaepernick’s story, the context of his protests must also be considered. In the article “Colin Kaepernick’s Actions Show That Symbols Pledge Allegiance to Principles”, Rashad Robinson explains the symbolism behind Kaepernick’s actions and argues that his actions represent the “symbols of the hard work in America that remains to be done, and the readiness to do it.” (Robinson). Undoubtedly, the U.S. is currently plagued by racial tensions, stemming from a long history of oppression. People of color have historically been oppressed and persecuted in the country and continue to be to this day. In 2015, The Washington Post tracked police shootings in the United States and revealed that “black men accounted for about
40 percent of the unarmed people fatally shot by police and, when adjusted by population, were seven times as likely as unarmed white men to die from police gunfire” (Lowery). There is no question that the United States has a problem with police brutality, and the first step in changing this is addressing that there is a problem. Through protesting this brutality, Kaepernick is taking a step towards change. When considering this whole context and history of oppression, it is possible to see the reasoning behind his actions. And with this understanding, it is clear how his actions were not out of disrespect to the flag but out of desperate need for change. As Robinson argues, Kaepernick’s actions are a symbol for what needs to change in the country and his willingness to put his career on the line for it shows how urgent the issue is.

We honor the flag by fighting for the values it stands behind. Brian Adam Jones is a United States Marine who served in Afghanistan. He argued in his article “I Fought to Defend Colin Kaepernick’s Actions” that because the flag represents freedom of expression and freedom of speech, it is justified to focus protests around it. He argues that “if the flag is a sacred symbol for America's values, we should honor it by rigorously debating what those values are, and whether we are doing them justice” (Jones). A healthy relationship is not one of blind respect and obedience. In this sense, Americans must also have a healthy relationship with the flag and its ideals. They shouldn’t simply blindly obey it, but rather challenge what it means and what it represents, and through this, truly honor its values. The word “honor” itself means to “fulfill (an obligation) or keep (an agreement)” (“Honor”). By protesting, Kaepernick is fulfilling his obligation as an American to stand up to injustice. He is honoring the flag by ensuring that the agreement of equality is being kept. If the flag represents freedom and equality, then we must honor those values by challenging those who aren’t staying true to that ideology. If we let the flag just be another empty symbol that we are scared to challenge in fear of being disrespectful,
then we let it be just another piece of cloth. It is only when we apply and challenge those values that we truly honor the flag for what it is.

Critics of Kaepernick’s actions have called his moves unpatriotic and disrespectful. They argue that since the flag is such a sacred symbol in our country, that not to stand proudly before it is to disrespect what the flag symbolizes. In his article “Don’t Mess With the Stars and Stripes”, Marc Leepson argues that “Americans have a unique and special feeling for our flag — a near-religious feeling for many,” (Leepson) and because of this “near religious” feeling, the flag should be revered and worshiped. However, this logic is flawed when taking a deeper look at the actual action that has been called so disrespectful and what it symbolizes. When looking at what “taking a knee” has symbolized in the past, it has never been a symbol of disrespect. In Christianity, kneeling shows humility before God. In sports, players take a knee when a coach has something urgent to say. When proposing, a person gets down on one knee and asks another for their hand in marriage. Taking a knee has always been a sign of reverence and humility. So why is it suddenly looked at as disrespectful when done towards the flag? When analyzing the action based on what the traditional meaning of taking a knee has represented, it’s possible to interpret Kaepernick’s action as one of reverence to the flag but also as addressing an urgency to change. And if Americans really do feel a near religious sentiment towards the flag, then they should also consider “taking a knee” in the context of religion, and perhaps they wouldn’t be so offended by Kaepernick’s actions.

This issue has raised a lot of questions around the true meaning of being a patriot and how to respect the flag and its ideals. Although some might feel that Kaepernick’s actions were unpatriotic, patriotism is not about simply standing up during the national anthem, but rather
about standing up for the rights that America represents and speaking out when those rights are being violated. As Gandhi said, we must not be cowardly when occasion demands speaking out.
Works Cited


Gandhi, Mahatma. “Silence becomes...speaking out.” *Goodreads*,


