Taking a Knee: a Respectful Method of Protest

In the town of Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, unarmed black man Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer. As with many American cities, Ferguson’s law enforcement officers were disproportionately Caucasian, with all but three in the city’s force being white (Ungar-Sargon 1). San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick and other NFL stars were protesting this kind of disparity when they knelt during the singing of the national anthem, an action known as “taking a knee”. They refused to stand up for the symbols of freedom in a country where they did not feel they were free. These actions and the subsequent reactions to them have gained significant attention in the past year, warranting opinions from many people, including celebrities as well as politicians like President Donald Trump, who “demanded that NFL owners ‘fire or suspend’ players who kneel during the national anthem” (Wagner 1). However, Trump’s and others’ rationales are flawed: taking a knee and other forms of protest aimed toward the American flag should be allowed during the national anthem because they are constitutional, rational, and respectful.

To start, the dissenters are doing something perfectly legal by kneeling during the anthem. They are using their constitutional rights and attempting to improve what they think is a negative situation in their country. The First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law … abridging … the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (LII Staff, “First Amendment” 1). The founding fathers believed that the
best way to enact political advancement was to address the government through nonviolent protest. Colin Kaepernick and others are not harming anyone by taking a knee, so, as a community, Americans should let them perform their demonstration. Not only is it legal to not salute the American flag, it is illegal to force someone to do so. In the landmark 1943 Supreme Court decision *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, the justices ruled that “the action of a State in making it compulsory for children in the public schools to salute the flag and pledge allegiance … violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments” (LII Staff, “West Virginia” 1). This means that, despite the wishes of some, a teacher cannot lawfully make a student perform any “patriotic” action. The case of the NFL players is comparable: in both examples, citizens would be obliged to salute a country’s flag that they did not want to salute. Thus, taking a knee is both legal and unpunishable by law.

Moreover, the NFL members’ grievances are completely justified: there is an astounding amount of racial inequality in the United States. In particular, they have paid attention to the major issue of bias in the law enforcement system. In 2013, African-American men were jailed over six times as frequently as their Caucasian counterparts relative to their population sizes, a higher ratio than in 1960, prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act (Drake 1). This culture of racial prejudice is reminiscent of the decades of American history when those of European ancestry, the “true” Americans, were legally superior to those who were not. Not only are minorities being discriminated against in the justice system, there is evidence that black citizens are disproportionately victims of police violence. Despite the only “13.2 percent of African-Americans in the general population” of America, “31.8 percent of people shot by the police” are African-American (qtd. in Mullainathan). This notable discrepancy between the expected and actual racial makeup of police shooting casualties is indicative of the broader issue of
opportunity inequity in the United States. Blacks are not given the same chances as people of other races and are, on average, more impoverished (Jones 1), uneducated (Reeves et al. 1), and incarcerated (Drake 1) than Americans as whole. These racial discrepancies are problematic in society and, if nothing is done about the issue, the divide will only widen. The protesters are trying to prevent a reversion to the previous negative situation by bringing attention to anti-minority violence by police forces and promoting equal rights.

In addition, American values are constantly being revised as time passes, and American symbols should represent this. All citizens should be able to use their national emblems to express whatever ideas they would like to get across. Cynthia Idriss-Miller, a professor of sociology at American University, argues that the purpose of the flag is to “offer a focal point for diverse societies to express and navigate what it is that unites and represents them”, not to be a “static representation of unchanging ideals” (1). The athletes’ activism is not anti-American; it is a show of their perception of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Because each person has a different interpretation of the meaning of the flag, one can disrespect police brutality and other wrongs without being rude to one’s entire country. There is historical precedent for this type of protest: Tommie Smith and John Carlos were American Olympians who raised their fists in the air in a symbol of outcry against racial inequality known as the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic games. They “knew [their actions] would become a moment of truth” and that, by protesting, they might be rejected by society (Brown 1). Despite this, they symbolically fought for human rights, and that momentous event has become an embodiment of bravery in the face of adversity. If our society criticizes these courageous advocates, it is creating an environment in which positive social change is discouraged.
On the other hand, some argue that taking a knee is a gross act of irreverence to a nation because the flag represents national virtues and the brave citizens who fought for them. For instance, historian and journalist Marc Leepson contends that the dissenters are disrespecting centuries of American figures who fought for “all that is admirable in the American political history” (1). He and others feel that the many soldiers who battled under the American flag should be saluted rather than ruthlessly denied and that to kneel during the national anthem is to disavow one’s own country and heritage. However, the aforementioned heroes were those, from Hamilton to Lincoln to Kennedy, who themselves promoted justice by creating advances in society. Thus, with their demonstration, Kaepernick and many other NFL players are honoring the American tradition of resisting oppression. And, even if the players’ taking a knee was disrespectful to the flag and its symbols, that would be no reason to prohibit them from doing so. As the Enlightenment-era philosopher Voltaire supposedly once said, “while I disapprove of what you say, I will defend to the death your right to say it” (Cullen 1). This sentiment is at the heart the movement: by taking a knee, they are taking a stand for the right of minorities to voice their minds without harm.

Although taking a knee can be seen as offensive to veterans and other icons, it is ultimately an expression of courage, reverence, and American-ness—an act of resistance to an intolerant part of society. Therefore, every person should be allowed to fight for what he or she believes is right, whether or not that protest contradicts the opinions of authorities. In fact, it is critical that, as citizens, we protest when necessary to keep the government’s influence in check and prevent oppressive acts like the police brutality seen today. Whether Americans decide to be accepting of these dissenters’ actions will have long-lasting repercussions in our country’s legal system, so it is imperative to support these valiant stars in their efforts.
Works Cited


