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OpEd: Colin Kaepernick and the Racist History of Our National Anthem

by KOBIE BROWN

Colin Kaepernick's decision to sit in protest of police brutality during "The Star-Spangled Banner" urges a closer look at our national anthem, its author and the realities of police brutality.

It also begs the question, will we be a country that idolizes symbols or wakes up each day attempting to solidify our substance?

Written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key and adopted in 1931 as America's national anthem, its creator would be considered evil and immoral by today's standards.

After successfully attacking Washington, D.C. and burning down the White House in 1812, the British, among other things, offered freedom to any enslaved African who would join them in their fight against the United States.

By September of 1814, the British turned their attention to the port city of Baltimore, Maryland. Those very bombs bursting in the air, the rockets with red glare, and the defeat of the British led Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner," in which he pronounced in the rarely sung third stanza:

No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of
the grave: And the Star-Spangled Banner
in triumph doth wave, O'er the land of the
free and the home of the brave

Colin Kaepernick has chosen to use his power and influence to draw attention to a systemic issue that plagues Americans and to which there seems to be little compromise on the part of lawmakers and police unions: police brutality and extrajudicial murder, particularly of unarmed black women and men.

Although he wasn't a football player, Francis Scott Key was no stranger to power and influence either. Key's wealth and power were rooted in being a slaveholder, and as

Washington D.C.'s District Attorney from 1833-1840 he used his office and its influence to vehemently defend slavery.

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As the movement to abolish slavery grew in America its agenda and members were faced with numerous attacks, both legal and physical. There was blood in the streets.

In a high-profile case that drew national attention, Key prosecuted a doctor who lived in Georgetown for possessing abolitionist pamphlets. In the case of U.S. v. Reuben Crandall, Key sought to have the defendant hanged, asserting the property rights of those who owned Africans, and the quality of life having a second class of citizens the institution afforded them held more weight than the free speech rights of those arguing to abolish slavery. Key was not alone, he was in league with pro-slavery Congressmen who in 1836 passed a series of "gag rules" to quash all anti-slavery petitions and prevent them from being read or discussed.

The responses to Kaepernick's stand remind us that symbolism often outweighs substance in the political views of many Americans.

180 years later attempts are being made to do the same. This time, a team of modern-day Francis Scott Keys has taken the field in an attempt to "gag" or "hang" Kaepernick by discrediting him, rather than looking at the substance of his comments and actions.

The first play they called was to paint him as unpatriotic for not standing during the national anthem.

Next, they reached out to the NFL and San Francisco 49ers in writing, calling his comments ill-advised and suggesting the quarterback "could lend his commentary to the over 8,000 murders that African Americans inflicted on one another in 2015."

Their third play involved recruiting an African American sports analyst, who confidently asserted Kaepernick is in no position to question or discuss the depredations of police brutality because he isn't black. The sports analyst, though knowledgeable about football, advances an argument that assigns the responsibility of addressing civil and human rights violations exclusively upon color lines. This argument shows a lack of knowledge and intelligence when one considers the role people of all races and nationalities played in abolition as well as ending segregation.

The fourth, but far from final play has been to assert the NFL is responsible for his actions.

Each argument completely ignores the need to address the root cause of Kaepernick's decision not to stand by deflecting from and attempting to discredit the validity of the discussion about improving police-community relations.

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Twenty years ago former NBA player, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf was suspended for a game for his refusal to stand for The Star-Spangled Banner before games. He called the flag a symbol of oppression and noted that America had a long history of tyranny that conflicted with his religious beliefs. Few came to his defense as he sat alone.

Twenty-eight years prior, Black Olympians, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists in the air as "The Star-Spangled Banner" played following their victories (gold and bronze respectively) in the 200-meter sprint event, in what Smith would later call a "human rights salute" to protest systematic racism and oppression. They were sent back home and subsequently ostracized for their role in calling attention to the hypocrisy of liberty and justice of all.

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Colin Kaepernick has gained the support and company of his teammate, safety Eric Reid as well as Seattle Seahawks cornerback Jeremy Lane. His protest has gained support of many of the veterans who say they fought to ensure his right to protest and petition.

From Colin Kaepernick to Francis Scott Key certain realities remain true. On any given day throughout history, whether as athletes, citizens or benefactors of the rights paid for by the plundering of other human's freedom throughout time, in the contest toward true justice and freedom the game doesn't change, just the players.

With every waking day, each of us picks, plays for and knowingly, or unknowingly, improves the position of a respective side - hypocrisy or humanity.

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