

## From Protest to Solution: A New Anthem for NFL Players

DECEMBER 3, 2018

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Since our country's founding, peaceful protests have been protected by the Constitution through the First Amendment. We all have the right to protest peacefully on any subject we choose. Many people utilize this right in a multitude of ways, some being more effective than others. Take, for example, the NFL protests, which began when Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem in a televised game on August 26, 2016, an act that was simultaneously widely supported and widely criticized on a national level. Shortly after Kaepernick's actions, players from various teams began to emulate him in protest of racial inequality. While these NFL protests acknowledge the continuance of racial problems in America, they also tend to result in anger and misunderstanding. They may draw attention to the racial issues in our country, but it is unclear whether they help to solve them. Thus, we must ask ourselves whether these protests are effective in combating the racial issues in our country today. In reality, the NFL protests do succeed in spreading awareness; however, they largely fail in fixing the issues at hand and, therefore, must be improved to have the desired impact that NFL players claim to strive for: the elimination of racial disparities in social, legislative, and economic systems in America.

### The Undeniable Impact

Kaepernick's protests have grown both in size and impact on our national discussion since their commencement in August 2016, spreading awareness of racial inequality and starting a new conversation on the topic of race in America. According to Kaepernick himself, "I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change" (Wagner-McGough, 2016, para. 3). Kaepernick's goal was to start a dialogue about racial issues, and it appears to have worked. According to Pew, an esteemed political and socioeconomic research center, the number of voters who found treatment of racial and ethnic minorities to be an important issue in need of address, were negligibly low in the 2012 election, but 63% of voters said the problem was "very important" to them by 2016 (Clark, 2012; Fingerhut, 2016, p. 1). Such a huge leap could be reasonably attributed to the NFL protests' gaining national attention three short months before the presidential election. Thus, it is clear that these protests have raised awareness, but, have they helped to fix the problem? Some would argue that raising awareness is progress, while others claim that the protests have made racial divisions even worse. The answer, as is often the case, is a combination of both views.

### The Key Difference Between Awareness and Solutions

While shedding light on a problem is necessary for action to take place, America needs a solution rather than mere awareness of the problem. Albert Einstein once commented, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions" (qtd. in Deutsch, 2013, p. 6). Given this mindset, it could be possible that these protests have done a great service by bringing this problem into the light and forcing America to begin thinking of a solution. However, a focus on the issue rather than the solution is detrimental. There comes a time when the resources and means for a solution must be implemented to combat the now identified problem. As Dorothea Brande (a famous writer and editor from New York) once explained, "A problem clearly stated is a problem half solved" (qtd. in O'Grady, 2015, p. 61). The problem-identifying stage must give way to its natural evolution, the problem-solving stage. In layman's terms, it is now time to "put our money where our mouths are." We must offer potential solutions and implement them in order to move forward and avoid the all too familiar drop off of interest that inevitably occurs when a movement fails to effect change. Some use this idea to justify an unflattering view of Colin Kaepernick. They claim that he irresponsibly started a protest movement rather than attempting to solve the problem he so adamantly highlights. However, those who posit such ideas would be ignorant of Kaepernick's recent actions. Kaepernick pledged one million dollars to black communities in need as of September 2016 (Wagner-McGough, 2016, para. 1). This move toward a solution is certainly commendable. However, despite this and other actions by NFL players to begin solving the racial issues our country faces, the message sent through their protests is often being changed, criticized, and even identified as part of the problem. It may come as a surprise, but the players are not blameless in this miscommunication. The lack of clarity in their message is problematic, making it easy to distort and/or misinterpret their protests.

### Powerful Protests Prompt Powerful Divisions

Though the NFL protests have helped raise awareness about racial divides in America, they have also exacerbated those divides, and indeed encouraged others. The message of racial inequality is present, but many see NFL players' sitting or taking a knee during the pledge as disrespectful. Their acts seem to diminish not only the value of the flag and the country, but also the soldiers who have died and continue to die to protect them, their families, and the freedoms that they enjoy. Given this view, it is understandable why these protests would be called hypocritical, considering these players are only able to protest because they live in a country that grants freedom of speech thanks to the sacrifices of many before them. The problem is not that the NFL protesters fail to explain themselves over social media or to the public, but that a knee-jerk reaction would often attribute sitting for the pledge of allegiance to be a form of disrespect or protest against America itself. Thus, the message is confused and misinterpreted to the point that it actually encourages hostility and anger rather than encouraging a discussion of racial issues. The problem here comes from perspective, of which there are many within our country. Some look at the actions of NFL players as divisive, ungrateful, and even hateful toward the country that is giving them millions of dollars per year to play sports. These problems would be much less prevalent if Kaepernick had not chosen the national anthem as a podium for his message. By doing so, he shifted the focus of the protests from racism in America to America itself, which has been the cause of a substantial backlash. Despite these issues, the messages are still legitimate in many respects, and there is certainly a way to use them effectively while keeping said messages clear. In fact, NFL players are in a unique position to help solve the problems of racial disparity in America. However, they must be aware of this position that they hold in order to have a positive impact rather than a negative one, much like Olympic sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith in the 1968 Olympics.

### Understanding and Healing the Divide

Smith and Carlos reveal the opportunities for both division and progress in these kinds of situations, serving as an example of the potential pitfalls inherent in such protests. In 1968, the two sprinters decided to stage a protest against racial inequality in America. Although the racial divides and problems were much more common and problematic during this time, the similarities between these protests and those in the NFL are quite evident. The two African-American men placed first and third in the Men's 200 meter, when they each "mounted the medal stand with an 'Olympic Project for Human Rights' button pinned to [their] track jacket[s], black socks displayed prominently by shoeless feet and rolled pant legs, and a single black glove [each]" (Sherman, Dijk, Alinder, & Aneesh, 2013, pp. 219-220). Scholars have analyzed this moment in history in the book *The Long 1968*. Here they quote William C. Roden's commentary explaining the diverse reactions to the protest: "For many of us, their silent demonstration—one part human rights, one part black power—is an enduring symbol of resistance and righteous indignation. For others, the demonstration was disrespectful and even treasonous" (qtd. in Sherman et al., 2013, pp. 219-220). These two men etched their place in sports history with their defiance.

The protests in the NFL, despite taking place nearly four decades later, are similar in their ability to bring together and divide the country. They, too, have the possibility of being taken as disrespectful, stirring up flames of derision and outrage along the lines of perception and interpretation. However, they also have the possibility of opening a dialogue, highlighting issues, and helping to fix them. The challenge is keeping the message clear. Although kneeling during the national anthem may be a big stage for a protest, that does not mean it is the most effective or appropriate. Many NFL athletes have the media's attention at their fingertips and could thus find a medium of protest that more clearly represents that which they decry. NFL players are not protesting the flag, the anthem, or the founding concepts of the country, but rather the current racial divide. This concept would be much better addressed outside of the context generated by the national anthem lest the message be lost in translation.

Thanks to our ability to engage instantly with millions of people in today's society, a solution is close at hand. With modern media, news networks could set up a live stream discussion pertaining to racial disparity after the games, fostered, funded, and supported by the football players themselves. These streams could incorporate fundraising by providing links to donate to organizations that would support poor African-American communities or contribute to the changing of laws that are discriminatory based on race. If this were implemented correctly, it would likely garner support from many different groups and individuals throughout the country. Some might say that providing an opportunity to get involved is not a solution, but we cannot force each other to do anything. A solution is only possible through the will to change, and because that has already been fostered by these protests, however divisive they may have been, an opportunity to take action is exactly what Americans need. After all, it is not the NFL players themselves who will make the difference in our nation, but the people on the ground working to further the solution. If a live stream and donation center is not the ideal way to get involved, then the NFL players could start a commercial campaign that would air during their games, outlining certain racial injustices and encouraging listeners to write letters to their local government, requesting specific reforms to fix those issues. Even hosting a question and answer session or debate on said issues after the game would facilitate progress. At the end of the day, the idea is helping others get involved, and this can be done without continuing the extreme controversy that these protests have created.

Because African-American NFL players make up a large percentage of all players in the NFL, they are uniquely situated to use their vast incomes and influence to make a difference in their communities and in this country, just as Colin Kaepernick has done by donating a million dollars to African American communities in need. Because the matter of racial division in America has now been magnified, it is time to take steps to heal the divide. If more NFL players took Kaepernick's lead by donating and supporting the cause, rather than protesting, both African American communities and the country at large could greatly benefit. In this way, there would be no doubt as to the message being sent; equality must be ensured for all races, whether that be social, economic, or legal.

This goal, however, does not start with the national anthem, football players, or even Caucasians or African Americans. The move toward achieving this goal starts with the individual. Thus, viewers of the NFL must join in a civil national discussion and allow level heads to prevail, both on and off the field. The message means nothing if it comes only from the lips of NFL players, and it cannot become a reality without the support from fans and proponents alike. Each must be willing to give time and money towards solving these racial issues. This is our country, and to act like it, we must begin by treating each other with respect and building this nation up, rather than becoming divisive and tearing each other down. In this way, we go from group arguments to individual discussions, which is in itself a microcosm of the goals espoused by NFL players and fans alike: equal opportunity and treatment for all.

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