

Have No Fear: Defending The NFL Players Protests from Its Defenders

September 26, 2018



The most popular defense of the NFL players protest argues that Colin Kaepernick, as well as those who have joined him, are not protesting the National Anthem or American identity in general, but only police violence. In kneeling at the start of every NFL game, the players perform a respectful nod to the military while simultaneously calling for a re-thinking of minority status in America.

The reference here is implicitly to former Army 'Green Beret', Nate Boyer who gave Kaepernick the "thumbs up" to protest as long as he "took a knee" rather than sat down (the latter would be considered disrespectful to the troops and the flag). Kaepernick himself gave credence to this position, "I have great respect for the men and women that have fought for this country. I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country. And they fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone." The claim is not necessarily against the American-ideal but for its failed promise, "People are dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody." The statement is less about contesting American identity but rather its exclusive nature; black lives are in-practice not counted as part of "everyone".

This sentiment was picked up by FOX, ESPN, and CNN among other popular news outlets, with a slight (but important) distortion and retreat. Responding to Trump's inflammatory tweets, Shannon Sharp, on the popular show *Undisputed*, put forth a clarification, "this wasn't a protest this was unity ... it's not about the flag, its not about the military, it's not about the police, it's about the brutality that unarmed men and women are suffering. It's about the injustices of men and inequities that are going on in America". Other articles appeared (including from fellow NFL protestor Eric Reid) stating that protests were not about "disrespecting" national identity but about an American exercise in free speech protest. Through these defenders, the protests have been understood (among liberals) as not pertaining to the flag, nation, military, or even the police but rather abstract inequality and discrimination against people of color (the prevalence of too many bad apples).

Nonetheless, countless conservative outlets have (and continue to) bash Kaepernick and the protestor's actions as "un-American" and "disrespectful". Here is Kaepernick's former teammates response: "That flag obviously gives [Kaepernick] the right to do whatever he wants, I understand it. At the same time, you should have some *fucking* respect for people who served, especially people that lost their life to protect our freedom." The liberal reply to this has been to double down. Commentators, with increasingly manifest anger, cite the same quotes from Boyer, Kaepernick, Reid, and numerous other NFL players arguing for their pro-military or American intentions. They go even further and discuss the charity many players contribute off the field and their well-meaning character. But the result is a stalemate: liberals claim non-aggression and an American right to self-expression, while conservatives insist that the protesters embody a fundamentally anti-American position.

But what if stalemate exists because conservatives, in a particular sense, have hit upon something true? What if the Right is correct: The NFL player protests constitutes a critique not only of police violence but of the “flag” and American National identity as such? In other words, movements against police brutality and for black lives, make palpable the false universality of American identity and thus constitute a threat to it in all manifestations (military, flag, identity, and so on). Regardless of what some conscious “justifications” of the protest claim, then, The NFL players are protesting what it means to be American. Directly stated, since (1) American identity is constituted through a repression of blackness (through a devaluation and Other-ing of black lives), and (2) the NFL players protest not only makes visible this devaluation, but calls for a reevaluation of values; then (3) the protest necessarily imply a re-definition of Americanism. This is not to suggest that Kaepernick is protesting individual troops (nor should he) or “hates Americans” but that he is indeed protesting something fundamental about American identity. In protesting police violence and American racism, players inherently to do more than put forth particular demands (i.e. to not be killed by police). That is, since American identity is predicated upon this oppression, to challenge said oppression, is to challenge what America itself stands for.

In this sense, the intense counter-reactions to the protests are appropriate. Acts ranging from fans burning Jerseys, the NFL blacklisting Kaepernick, all the way to the intervention of the president are not “over-reactions” but attest to the radically universal nature of Kaepernick’s simple (particular) demand. The key then, is not to “defend” or qualify Kaepernick and the NFL protest, but to refuse to back-down from their radical (American re-defining) implications.

This brings us to a final point and the most recent development: Kaepernick’s decision to partake in an advertisement contract with Nike. The collaboration first began with Kaepernick tweeting the Nike logo below the quote “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything” and was followed by a televised commercial featuring kids in Nike gear overcoming obstacles. The latter two-minute ad concludes with a proclamation, “don’t ask if your dreams are crazy, ask if they are crazy enough”. Within the first week of the ad’s public release Nike generated an estimated \$42 million dollars in publicity. Its online sales jumped 27 percent in three days.

Although all this may seem tangential to the NFL protest, the case of Kaepernick himself teaches us otherwise. Consider Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid’s current NFL status: unemployed. Now consider Nike’s notorious history of labor rights violations as well as numerous racial and sexual discrimination charges. The simply fact is, labor discrimination is instrumental in crushing political dissent. Corporations like Nike have a storied history of suppressing protest like Kaepernick’s. Nike has a vested interest in maintaining an American identity that excludes (predominantly people of color) domestic and foreign workers; it is tied to the same (white supremacists) American identity that NFL players protest.

So what does this mean? As a recent article in the *Guardian* noted, this is not to say that Kaepernick has “sold out”, or is politically “insincere”, or to detract from his incredible courage in any way. It is rather to argue that to stick to the radical dimension of the NFL player’s protest itself, players will have to link up with other forms of struggle.

Kaepernick boldly rejected showing “pride in a flag for a country that oppress black people and people of color”. This rejection implies nothing short of a redefinition of American values and identity; yet, maintaining fidelity to this implication means seeing the ways in which capitalist labor relations and things like gender discrimination not only constitute American identity but are instrumental in the Other-ing of blackness.

In the most practical terms this means aligning with NFL players who don’t take a knee during the Anthem but jog, sit, stretch, and “worse”. Even further players must also form alliances with the

“problematic” stars who hold out (Le’Veon Bell) and seek better contract negotiations; those who are finned for acting-out and “inappropriate celebrations” (Odell Beckham Jr.); offensive lineman who are underpaid yet face an average life expect of mid-50s (due to subconcussive injuries); fans who, at the whims of owners, are subject to ticket hikes, stadium development that comes on the back of tax payers and displaces lower-income communities (often POC), and so on.

If the protest movement dies out, it will not be because it was too radical; it will be because it wasn’t radical enough. The NFL player’s protest doesn’t require defense; it requires fidelity.