

Songs of Freedom? The National Anthem and Black Oppression

By Hae Won Lee

“The Star-Spangled Banner” has long been a source of national pride that is thought to commemorate all of the individuals, men and women, who have fought, risked, or even lost their lives so that the United States could be the way it is today; however, there is a side to the national anthem that may surprise some. The national anthem, when sung during sporting events, only consists of one verse. This verse is the one that screams pride and ignites patriotic fire in the hearts of so many Americans. While that verse is unquestionably important, it is just as crucial to recognize what the remaining verses of the national anthem have to say. Two lines in the third verse exclaim: “No refuge could save the hireling and slave/From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave” (Key). The historical context of these two lines in the third verse refers to the two options that African Americans were given during the War of 1812 — to be freed and fight for the British, or to be enslaved. In just two short lines, Francis Scott Key summarizes what many African Americans have had to face since the founding of our nation: regardless of whether or not they are given freedom, they will always be followed by the shadow of oppression.

It is understandable, then, that the national anthem may not be a source of pride for the African-American professional athletes who play in America. The first recorded demonstration was Jackie Robinson’s refusal to participate: “I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag. I know that I am a black man in a white world” (Willingham). In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who were African- and Cuban-American US Olympic runners, raised their fists at the medal ceremony while the national anthem played. This was the same year that Martin Luther King Jr., arguably one of the most notable icons of the civil rights movement, was

assassinated and the show of the Black Power salute immediately faced backlash and was labeled by *Time* magazine as a “public display of petulance” (Willingham). Flashing forward to half a century later, in 2014, a few St. Louis Rams players took part in the Black Lives Matter movement with the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture, which was defended by the executive vice president of football operations as an expression of the rights granted by the First Amendment.

It wasn’t until Colin Kaepernick took a knee, however, that the social implications tucked away three verses into the national anthem came to the attention of a wider swath of American society. Amid the tense political climate, the responses to Kaepernick’s protest were all across the board. Some shamed Kaepernick for directly disrespecting the men and women who have died for the country and the opportunity that had been given to him through the country itself, while others applauded Kaepernick for bringing the controversy to light. President Trump himself stated, “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL... he or she should not be allowed to disrespect... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED. Find something else to do!” (@realDonaldTrump).

There is a glaring misrepresentation, however, in the President’s tweet: Kaepernick and the players who have joined him are not protesting the national anthem itself nor the flag. Instead, they are protesting police brutality against African Americans and the lack of legal protections for those who have fallen victim to such oppression. This misrepresentation has created unnecessary misunderstandings. It is true that some may argue racism has become a less prevalent issue than it was in the past. Slavery has long since been deemed inhumane; African-Americans now have the right to vote and a myriad of laws such as affirmative action have been passed as methods of paying for the sins that the country has committed in the past. However,

just because people of color are no longer enslaved and steps have been taken to dilute the long lasting impact that slavery has on them does not mean that racism and black oppression is any less of a problem than it was throughout America's history. Instead, the oppression has taken on a different form, and Kaepernick's protest and the increasing media awareness of police brutality are helping to reveal that bigotry today.

The frequency of police brutality occurrences continues steadily over the past few years. In 2015, *The Washington Post* began an ongoing study of the numbers of fatal shootings by the police each year following the controversial shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. With about 1000 shootings each of the three years noted, there were "twice as many shootings by police in 2015 and 2016 as ever recorded in a single year by the FBI's tracking" (Sullivan).

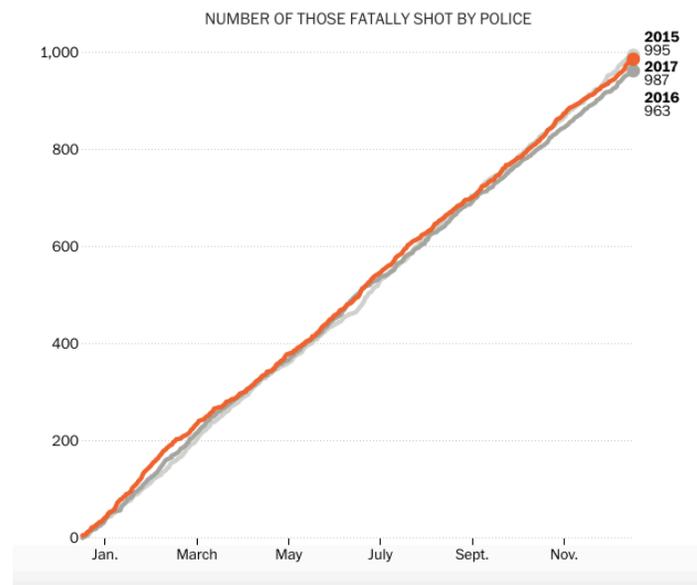


Figure 1. Study by Washington Post

According to the graph above, the trend in 2015 and 2016 continued in 2017, and by the end of the year, there were 987 fatal shooting deaths. Despite the efforts to decrease the number of fatality due to police shootings, there were 24 more deaths in 2017 than in 2016. The study also showed that in contrast to the popular belief that only people of color are the victims of such

brutality, the majority of the fatal shootings occurred between police officers and white armed males. This is not to say, however, that people of color are not specifically more susceptible to become victims of brutality. Even though African-Americans make up only 6% of the nation's population, they account for a disturbingly and disproportionately large number of deaths — nearly 25% of the total deaths by police officers (Sullivan).

Police brutality is not the only way that people of color face oppression today; the election of Donald Trump as president has opened up a door to new and extreme expressions of bigotry in the nation. When Trump first won the election in 2016, the shock was evident through the responses on social media. Celebrities began to tweet words of comfort and apologized for the racism that was still prevalent throughout the country; it was as if America had taken one giant leap back from the progress it had made during the presidency of our first African-American president. In some ways, it was true.

Soon after his election, in August of 2017, an extreme demonstration of white nationalism occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia where the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis, infamous for their hatred towards people of color, gathered to openly display their hatred towards specific groups. Instead of condemning them, however, President Trump blamed “both sides” for allowing this to happen (Astor). It was only after facing the aftermath of rage from the general public that he begrudgingly stated that all forms of hate went against the American ideal— only to change that response again the next day to: ““You had a group on one side that was bad. You had a group on the other side that was also very violent. Nobody wants to say that”” (Trump). Due to his complicit acceptance of white supremacy that he appeared to live by, *Ta-Nehisi Coates* went as far as deeming Trump as the “first white president,” and this is not all stereotyping. In a country where the president is deemed to be the role model for the citizens,

this lack of disappointment and anger towards such bigotry only encourages more action; the election of Trump and this event clearly highlighted the lack of progress that the nation had made over the years.

Despite the glaringly obviousness of this step backward, the bigotry was not as acknowledged as it should have been. Seeing this, one can see why Kaepernick decided to take a knee. It is important to emphasize the phrase “take a knee.” Instead of sitting down, Kaepernick went down on one knee. He changed his initial action of sitting down after an exchange with an upset former Army Green Beret, Nate Boyer. According to Kaepernick, “We were talking to [Boyer] about how can we get the message back on track and not take away from the military, not take away from pride in our country, but keep the focus on what the issues really are” (MacCambridge). It is evident through Kaepernick’s statement that there was a lot of thought put into what type of posture they would take in order to correctly express their voice. The kneeling is symbolic of his desire to find a middle ground where he could pay respects to those who have lost their lives for the country that he lives in while protesting the stagnant nature of Americans when it comes to racism. There would not have been a need to kneel if the purpose of the protest was to disapprove of the national anthem or the flag; if that was the case, there would have been more of an impact by continuing to sit down in order to get more attention from the public.

Another point of contention lies in the fact that only singing the first verse of the anthem is a compromise in and of itself between black and white Americans. A simple analogy, however, can explain the problem with that assumption. Imagine “The Star-Spangled Banner” as an iceberg in the ocean. The tip of the iceberg that is visible to the human eye is the first verse of the anthem, and the rest of the iceberg that is underwater is the other verses. Just because only

the tip of the iceberg is visible does not mean that the rest of it that is underwater does not exist, and without the rest of the parts of the iceberg, the iceberg itself will not be whole. By not singing the offensive verse, we both condone the racism and erase our awareness of it at the same time. So, with that analogy, it makes sense of the struggle that people of color have with singing even just the first verse of the national anthem.

Seeing as the nation lacks substantial focus on the bigotry that is so prevalent throughout the country, Kaepernick and those who have the ability to make a stand that will reach the general public should use that to their advantage. Kaepernick has shown admirable courage in doing so. Racism is and always has been an issue that we have yet to overcome. While progress has been made, Kaepernick has helped make it evident that the progress has not been as big of a step forward as previously thought in light of the election of Donald Trump and the events following. The national anthem may be a source of pride for some Americans; however, it is important to recognize the underlying legacy of slavery and oppression that it carries and to take a stand (or a knee) for social justice for all, regardless of color.

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