**Socratic Seminar - American’s and our Flag**

Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, has created an uproar among football fans and others by [refusing to stand](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-49ers-stand.html?_r=0) for the national anthem. “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” he [said](http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-protest-of-national-anthem).

Why are national symbols, [staples at many sporting events](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/sports/football/colin-kaepernicks-anthem-protest-underlines-union-of-sports-and-patriotism.html?ref=football), so important to Americans?

**Assignment:** Read ALL FOUR Op-ed articles. After reading ALL FOUR, write one Socratic response directly at the author of one of the four that you DISAGREE with and one that you AGREE with. You should have a total of 2 Socratic Responses that should each be between 200-500 words. You can use the Google Chrome books as well, but please print and bring a copy to class on Thursday.

#1. Colin Kaepernick’s Actions Show That Symbols Pledge Allegiance to Principles

*Rashad Robinson is the executive director of*[*Color Of Change*](http://colorofchange.org/)*.*

Sport is played on a field of symbols. But it’s not just the flag or our national anthem, the trophies or the team logos, which have widespread symbolic power. People are symbols, too. Jackie Robinson was, and remains, a symbol. Same with Billie Jean King and so many others.

Black Americans are used to seeing our community’s heroes become American heroes. The transition to status as a national symbol usually comes at the point when the achievement becomes an enduring inspiration to all and identity ceases to make anyone (too) uncomfortable.

When San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to sit during the national anthem — in protest of the oppression that black people and other people of color face in America — much of the media storm focused on the symbolism of the anthem, which was interpreted to be under attack, and completely missed the equally powerful symbolism that we can only wish more Americans were obsessed with.

In that moment, Colin Kaepernick was no different than [Tommie Smith and John Carlos](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/17/newsid_3535000/3535348.stm) giving the Black Power salute during the 1968 Olympics, Jackie Robinson[writing](http://ftw.usatoday.com/2016/08/jackie-robinson-colin-kaepernick-autobiography-i-cannot-stand-and-sing-the-anthem) that he could not salute the flag as “a black man in a white world,” or the WNBA players [who wore Black Lives Matter T-shirts](http://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/wnba-fines-three-teams-and-players-for-wearing-black-lives-matter-t-shirts/) in protest of police brutality.

For us, these are symbols of the hard work in America that remains to be done, and the readiness to do it. For others, these are symbols of what they want reprieve from having to face. And there we have it: the devotion to the symbols of patriotism can be strangely at odds with the very actions of true patriots.

After decades of one visible black American after another risking their own profitable stake in being the hero America wants, in order to be the hero America actually needs, one would think that their actions would be finally understood. Through their actions, they are pledging allegiance to the principles of justice, equality and freedom, while also promising to tell the truth whenever those principles are betrayed.

As long as there is persistent injustice, there will be people who become symbols of standing up to it. We need these people — in fact no true change has ever been realized without them. Instead of focusing on the conventions Kaepernick is breaking, we should be focusing on the standard he is setting.

#2. The Emotional Attachment of National Symbols

[*Cynthia Miller-Idriss*](http://www.american.edu/cas/faculty/cynthia.cfm)*is an associate professor of education and sociology and the director of the International Training and Education Program at American University.*

Like other national symbols — the American flag, the Liberty Bell, the Statue of Liberty — the national anthem conveys meaning about the nation’s history, myths and ideals. These meanings evoke emotional attachment to the nation, crystallize identity and help people feel connected to something outside of their own immediate family and community. Therefore it’s not surprising that some people feel offended when they think a national symbol is not being respected.

National symbols *should* be respected — but not necessarily in the way most people think. National symbols deserve respect not because they are static representations of unchanging ideals, but because they offer a focal point for diverse societies to express and navigate what it is that unites and represents them. It is precisely because they carry meaning, values and ideals that national symbols are important spaces for debate and transformation.

We are constantly debating what symbols represent our collective ideals and when they need to change — whether this happens around discussions about who is depicted on the $20 bill or what the name of a college building should be. National symbols should challenge us to think about whose images are selected to represent all Americans and whose words are left out, about which histories get narrated and which are silenced. Discussions about national symbols become conversations that bring marginalized narratives into mainstream media and discourse. This is what gives national symbols their importance.

Every generation re-invents and re-imagines what the nation is and how we as Americans should relate to it. This process is rarely smooth, but it is necessary. This makes some people uncomfortable because at any particular moment, it can feel like the best way to respect any given national symbol is to treat it as sacrosanct. Stability can feel like comfort, and change can seem like a threat. But this is a false dichotomy.

On the contrary: debate and reinvention are imperative for democracy. So the best way to respect a national symbol is to embrace the moments when symbols force us to re-evaluate the meaning of being American. No matter whether people agree or disagree with Colin Kaepernick’s particular choice, by taking a seat, he raised the anthem up to its rightful place as a national symbol: an object that should always challenge us and provoke us to reflect — and discuss — what it means to be American.

#3. I Fought to Defend Colin Kaepernick’s Actions

[*Brian Adam Jones*](http://taskandpurpose.com/author/brianadamjones/)*, a United States Marine who served in Afghanistan from July 2011 to March 2012, is the editor in chief of*[*Task & Purpose*](http://taskandpurpose.com/)*.*

I’ve been out of the Marine Corps for a little over three years, and I still get chills when I see an American flag billowing in the wind. More times than I care to remember, as a young corporal in Afghanistan, I stood and saluted at ramp ceremonies as the bodies of the fallen were carried into an aircraft for the journey home, their caskets draped in American flags.

The flag is sacred to me — not because it represents the service members I know who died, but because it represents the values they died to defend. That’s why symbols of patriotism hold meaning wherever they appear across American society, including at sporting events.

One of those central values is freedom of expression, which Colin Kaepernick has every right to evoke. If the flag symbolizes freedom of expression, Kaepernick was absolutely correct to focus his protest on the flag. If the flag is a sacred symbol for America's values, we should honor it by rigorously debating what those values are, and whether we are doing them justice.

As a veteran, I revere the flag. As a black man, I share in Kaepernick’s anger and concerns over violence toward black men. And as an American, I respect his right to share his voice, and I admire his willingness to subject himself to scrutiny and to risk his career. Standing with his teammates, following along with everyone else, requires no courage. Blind obedience to the flag is not something I, or anyone I know, fought to defend.

#4. Don’t Mess With the Stars and Stripes

[*Marc Leepson*](http://www.marcleepson.com/bio4.html)*, a historian and journalist, is the author of nine books, including "*[*Flag*](http://www.marcleepson.com/flagbiography/index.html)*: An American Biography" and "*[*What So Proudly We Hailed*](http://www.marcleepson.com/fsk/index.html?ie=UTF8&tag=several01-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0230105041)*: Francis Scott Key, a Life."*

We Americans have a unique and special feeling for our flag — a near-religious feeling for many. We love to display our patriotism by wearing (or toting, or sitting on) every imaginable commercial item bedecked with the stars and stripes — hats, visors, bandanas, T-shirts, ties, running shorts, bikinis, earrings, blankets, chairs, umbrellas, sheets, pillow cases.

Alone among the nations of the world, we have a national holiday honoring our flag. Since 1942, a detailed federal flag code has spelled out guidelines for its use. Our official national march is “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” Our schoolchildren salute the flag by reciting the pledge of allegiance since 1892. Members of the U.S. House of Representatives have been reciting the pledge each business day since 1988; the Senate since 1999.

The flag and “The Star-Spangled Banner” — which is nothing if not an ode to the flag — are de rigueur elements of every type of political event and nearly every sporting event from Little League to the Super Bowl. That’s been true since the first documented playing of the anthem on Sept. 5, 1918, during the seventh inning stretch of the first game of the Chicago Cubs-Boston Red Sox World Series.

Clearly our No. 1 national symbol looms large in the social, political and emotional hearts and minds of millions of Americans. The question of why this is true has a multi-part answer. First, the flag stands for all that is admirable in American political history, especially our democratic form of government and the First Amendment freedoms we have enjoyed since 1776. It also has served as a unifying symbol — especially after the end of the Civil War — for a relatively young nation made up predominately of immigrants.

What’s more, the near religious fervor many of us accord to the flag derives from the fact that this nation has neither a state religion nor a royal family. We have replaced the trappings of national religion and monarchy with the red, white and blue American flag, and with “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

If you exercise your right to Freedom of Speech by disrespecting one or the other, you do so at your peril. Just ask Colin Kaepernick.