

Are the NFL Protests About the Flag or Not?

Colin Kaepernick said his protest was all about the flag. The NFL Players Union, which supports the players' right to kneel, stated that the protests are not about the flag. For Vice President Pence, who walked out on Sunday's Indianapolis-San Francisco game after about 20 players knelt, this is all about the flag. What are we to make of this?

This past Sunday, for the first time in several years, I attended an NFL game with one of my grandsons, after I was given two tickets by a player on the Detroit Lions. Being there in person underscored to me how much these anthem protests do feel like an attack on the flag, even if it's not the players' intent.

You have the honor guard standing in their military regalia. You have the flag (or flags) hanging proudly. You have the call through the loudspeakers to stand in honor of our national anthem. And you have the stirring words of the anthem itself, which we're probably listening to more attentively than ever before. And in this particular game, during halftime, a local military survivor of Pearl Harbor and World War II walked onto the field to the applause of the crowd.

Whatever each athlete's intent might be, it really does feel like an affront on the flag if they choose to kneel. That's why I previously argued that, from a strategic point of view alone, the players are hurting their own cause by protesting the anthem.

They might not be anti-American. They might even come from military families. But had any players knelt during the anthem at the game I attended, it would have felt wrong within the stadium, even more so than when watching at home. Why alienate

the very people you want to enlist in your cause?

As for whether the protest is an affront to the flag, let's not forget the words of Colin Kaepernick, who started the whole kneeling movement: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

Whether or not you agree with his assessment of America and its treatment of people of color, and whether you deem him a hero or a fool, it is undeniable that he was protesting the American flag. To repeat, with emphasis, "*I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag* for a country that oppresses black people and people of color."

In contrast, after Dallas Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones announced that players who wouldn't stand for the anthem wouldn't play, NFL Players Association executive director DeMaurice Smith released a statement saying "no player is disrespecting our country or our flag."

But didn't Kaepernick say the opposite of this? And aren't the players who are kneeling showing solidarity with him?

I believe Mr. Smith is sincere, but is he speaking for the protesting players, or is Kaepernick speaking for the protesting players? And if the kneeling players are not, in fact, meaning to disrespect the flag, could they issue a joint statement repudiating Kaepernick's words?

In response to Vice President Pence leaving the game, Eric Reid of the San Francisco 49ers said, "And so, this is what systemic oppression looks like. A man with power comes to the game, tweets a couple things out and leaves the game, with an attempt to thwart our efforts." This is "systemic oppression"?

Pence explained via Twitter that, "I left today's Colts game because @POTUS and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem." And as the former governor of Indiana, he would have witnessed the return of the corpses of slain soldiers, their coffins draped in flags. You can understand why he doesn't take disrespect of our flag lightly.

How, then, can Eric Reid refer to Pence's actions as an example of "systemic oppression"? What is systemic about this, and how is it oppression? And if Reid wants the right to protest, doesn't Pence have the right to protest his protest? Statements like these only hurt Reid's cause, making some people wonder what world he's living in.

If you say in reply, "That's the whole point. The world Eric Reid and other players grew up in is very different than the world in which Mike Pence grew up."

That may be true, but his perspective is certainly skewed and his method of drawing attention to the perceived issues does more harm than good.

So, once again, I strongly encourage the players to listen to their owners—and now to Commissioner Roger Goodell, who is calling for the players to stand—and to find other ways to draw attention to racial oppression and injustice wherever they may be found in America.

Don't you think the whole nation would take notice if hundreds of NFL players (and coaches and even owners), both black and white, marched through the streets of one of our inner cities and then delivered several short speeches outlining their concerns? This is just one way (among many) that they could get their message out without appearing to disrespect our flag.

In the end, only by working together can we make America truly great.