

Taking a Knee: Colin Kaepernick and America's Forgotten Freedom Fighters

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AT 7:02 P.M. PACIFIC TIME on August 26, 2016, an innocent-looking tweet was sent out from the Twitter account of Jennifer Lee Chan, a San Francisco 49ers football reporter. The tweet was a photograph of the field at Levi's Stadium prior to a game between two National Football League (NFL) teams, the hometown 49ers and the Green Bay Packers. The tweet read simply, "This team formation for the National Anthem is not Jeff Fisher approved"—a sarcastic jab at Los Angeles Rams head coach Jeff Fisher.¹ The photograph would ignite a firestorm, though, when an enterprising and sleuthing fan discovered that 49ers backup quarterback Colin Kaepernick was sitting during the singing of the national anthem. By 11:46 that same night, Kaepernick was breaking news on the popular website ProFootballTalk (PFT), with contributor Mike Florio writing:

At a time when NFL players are criticized for not speaking out on social issues, Kaepernick has provided a very significant and conspicuous gesture. As the team noted, it's his right to do so. But given that Kaepernick opted to make a stand by sitting during the traditional pregame honoring of the country and its flag—which is so tightly woven into the DNA of the NFL—there surely will be a reaction.²

There was indeed a reaction, a wild-eyed cacophony of outrage and offense that willfully ignored Kaepernick's rationales and purpose for protesting. One United States Representative, Republican Steve King, went so far as to declare, "This is activism that is sympathetic to ISIS."³ Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg called the young athlete's stance "dumb and disrespectful."⁴ The 49ers tepidly stuck by Kaepernick and issued platitudes about respecting his right to protest (with the ever-obligatory wink-and-a-nod statement that this most assuredly did not mean that the 49ers *agreed* with the quarterback).

There is a remarkable irony in Kaepernick's demonization coming on the heels of the recent deification of another politically conscious athlete, Muhammad Ali. Like Ali, Kaepernick is thoughtful and articulate. Like Ali, Kaepernick has been able to clearly state his beliefs and purposes in his protest. Kaepernick has faced the media in both open press conferences and sit-down interviews. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he outlined his rationale for protest: "this country stands for freedom, liberty, and justice for all. And it's not happening for all right now."⁵ He also spoke specifically about police brutality and the killing of African American men and women at the hands of police: "There's people being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable. People are being given paid leave for killing people. That's not right. That's not right by anyone's standards."⁶

Kaepernick's listed grievances have not included the military. He has been abundantly clear that he is making a statement about America's failure to guarantee equal justice for all citizens and sitting during the national anthem—this most symbolic of moments—is a way of highlighting his belief that the nation is not equal to the symbol. He has stated unequivocally that his protest is not directed towards the military, telling the *Chronicle*:

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. That's not happening. 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. That's something that's not happening. I've seen videos, I've seen circumstances where men and women that have been in the military have come back and been treated unjustly by the country they fought for, and have been murdered by the country they fought for, on our land. That's not right.⁷

That Colin Kaepernick had to even speak to this issue is disturbing, or at least should be, for all Americans. Kaepernick was asked, "So many people see the flag as a symbol of the military. How do you view it and what do you say to those people?"⁸ The text of the question tells us much about this controversy. That the flag, the anthem, and the military could become so fully intertwined is a powerful indictment of the failure to teach history in our schools. No, social studies/history teachers are not to blame for the idiocy (including death threats) that met Colin Kaepernick's protest; yes, ignorant policy makers, greedy and jingoistic textbook publishers, and colleges of education more interested in obedience and compliance than vision or integrity, have all played a role in our having reached this place. Having fetishized the military, many Americans arrive at adulthood utterly ignorant of the men and women who, often without having ever worn the uniform, advanced the cause of freedom for Americans. It must be a matter of concern that both the flag and the national anthem have become synonymous with the military rather than the freedom, democracy, or even the rule of law. We have arrived at this troubling place in part due to what passes for historical study in our schools, which sanitizes, co-opts, or erases the troublemakers who painfully yet relentlessly pushed America towards the more perfect union Colin Kaepernick has told us he envisions and for which he is protesting.

Freedom Fighters in American History Textbooks

I examined five social studies/American history textbooks to get an idea of how they portray, approach, and/or discuss the movements and people—non-military—that have served as freedom fighters in American history (see **Figure 1**). The first thing one sees is that there are only two American protest movements that are taught with an eye towards human and civic *agency*—that is, the role of individuals actively engaged in transforming their society. If Ralph Waldo Emerson was correct that there is no history, only biography, then social protest movements in these texts are missing a fundamental element—citizens. Only the African American civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the Women's Suffrage movement have faces attached to the cause. To be sure, each book employs the same cast of characters with virtually no exceptions—

Selected American History Textbooks

Divine, Robert A., T. H. Breen, George M. Frederickson, R. Hal Williams, Ariela J. Gross, and H. W. Brands. *America Past and Present*. Eighth ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Henretta, James A., Eric Hinderaker, Rebecca Edwards, and Robert O. Self. *America's History*. Eighth ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014.

King, Wayne E. and John L. Napp. *United States History*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, 2005.

Lapsansky-Werner Emma J., Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor. *United States History*. Boston, MA: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2009.

Murrin, John M., Paul E. Johnson, James M. McPherson, Alice Fahs, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg. *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*. Boston, MA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2008.

Figure 1: Selected American history textbooks used for examining portrayals of freedom fighters and protest movements in the United States.

Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and, remarkably, Phyllis Schlafly. The Labor movement, American Indian civil rights movements, LGBTQ civil rights movements, and others are most often presented as amorphous and faceless.

Labor protests of the early twentieth century through to the New Deal are portrayed in the selected textbooks as vaguely threatening and un-American. *United States History* (2009) reduces labor protesters during the Great Depression to communists, socialists, and malcontents. “Even during the worst of the crisis,” the authors write with a remarkable lack of self-awareness, “communist calls for revolution proved no match for American dreams of progress, opportunity, and individual freedom.”⁹ This *Pravda*-worthy sentence could have been from the comments section of ProFootballTalk. *Liberty, Equality, Power* (2008) mentions Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor and contrasts him to the more “radical” elements of the movement. The authors inform students,

“the AFL accepted capitalism and the wage system, and worked for better conditions, higher wages, shorter hours, and occupational safety *within the system*” (italics mine).¹⁰ Gompers and the AFL are also clearly preferable to the Socialist Labor Party, which is described as something of a foreign influence. “Four-fifths of its members,” the authors inform their readers, “were foreign-born, mostly Germans.”¹¹

Protests against the Vietnam War also have a dark, mob-like quality to them in the way they are presented. *United States History* again distinguishes itself:

Across America, college campuses became centers of antiwar sentiment. Professors and students criticized the war for a variety of reasons, ranging from pacifism and the war's effects on the economy to a personal desire to avoid military service. Antiwar activity on college campuses did not, however, reflect the attitude of Americans as a whole.¹²

Protesters at the Democratic convention in 1968 get roughed up all over again by the authors, who write, “Many protesters sought only to exercise their right to free speech. Others, eyeing the ever-present television cameras, sought—and succeeded in attracting—a police response.”¹³ Such a dismissive and offensive statement is eerily reminiscent of CBS Sports announcer Jim Nantz, who was caught by a hot microphone saying of two NFL players who had joined Kaepernick's protest, “They're gonna keep kneeling as long as they have cameras right in their face.”¹⁴

Each textbook also goes to great pains to emphasize the moral and political supremacy of non-violent action, at times even setting up false choices for students based on this philosophy. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. versus Malcolm X is a popular, though ridiculous, example of one of these false choices. Militancy is the one unpardonable sin; moreover, militancy such as Kaepernick's is portrayed as being unnecessary and counterproductive. After all, in each scenario, the government is always at the ready to reform itself and society if citizens simply ask nicely. Of the Greensboro sit-ins aftermath, *United States History* (2005) offers “It became clear that the federal government had to act.”¹⁵ It's all so neat and easy. No doubt that's part of what makes the American Indian Movement (AIM) such a touchy subject for these books and their authors. Not only was AIM not wed to a non-violent approach, it also served and serves

as a powerful rebuke to much of the rest of these books. *United States History* (2009) states that the American Indian Movement “provoked a political backlash with some contending that the federal government gave special treatment to American Indians.”¹⁶ Indeed. As we have seen with the Chicago protests of 1968, students are also taught that violent agitators usually get what is coming to them. *Liberty, Equality, Power* records of the execution of the Chicago Haymarket bombers—“Most Americans applauded the summary repression of un-American radicalism.”¹⁷

Addressing Overlooked and Oversimplified Histories

The corrective to these flaccid portrayals is to finally allow the radicals *from* American history *in to* American history. Continuing with the example of the American Indian Movement, textbooks should insist on honoring the voices of men like Dennis Banks and women like Wilma Mankiller, both of whom were American Indian civil rights pioneers and have more than earned a place in the pantheon. Not one of the texts contained Banks’s description of Indian education, a description that places into powerful context the radicalism of AIM’s leaders:

There is one dark day in the lives of all Indian children: the day when they are forcibly taken away from those who love and care for them, from those who speak their language. They are dragged, some screaming and weeping, others in silent terror, to a boarding school where they are to be remade into white kids.¹⁸

Wilma Mankiller is a frequent “textbox” sidebar in social studies textbooks, but her role in AIM and the occupation of Alcatraz Island is ignored. Yet Mankiller recalled of that event, “The occupation of Alcatraz excited me like nothing ever had before. It helped to center me and caused me to focus on my own rich and valuable Cherokee heritage.”¹⁹ Russell Means, John Trudell, Anna Mae Aquash, Joyce Conseen Dugan—all are twentieth-century non-military American Indian leaders who controversially fought for advances for their communities.

There are also more familiar historical figures who have been neutered of their radicalism, sanded of their flaws, and reduced to what Malcolm X biting referred to as “mascots.” Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks are prominent

among this group. By 1968, Robert Kennedy was speaking in ways few American politicians ever have and connecting in ways no politician has since. He traveled to the site of the Wounded Knee massacre, where he told reporters, "The Germans show Dachau as a reminder. This was just as cruel, just as ruthless."²⁰ In an age of mandatory genuflecting to American exceptionalism, such a sentiment sounds like political suicide. Dr. King is recalled in the texts almost exclusively as a civil rights leader; his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War and his radical economic thinking is absent. King's extraordinary voice—along with its incredible radicalism—is silenced but for the final lines of his "I Have a Dream" speech. Compare the textbooks' descriptions of protest marchers to Dr. King's own description of those who took to the streets for civil rights: "He faced the bullies and the guns, the dogs and the tear gas. He put himself squarely before the vicious mobs and moved with strength and dignity toward them and decisively defeated them."²¹ Dr. King's positive portrayal of street protesters is not the only way in which the historical Dr. King seems to bear little resemblance to the mythological King. In 2016, Zaid Jilani reminded his readers that at the time of his death, "King was in the midst of waging a radical campaign against economic inequality and poverty, while protesting vigorously against the Vietnam War."²² As early as 1952, King was privately admitting the possibility that "capitalism has outlived its usefulness."²³ In 1966, King was telling his staff, "there must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."²⁴ One historian has described his Poor People's Campaign of 1968 as "King's lever to force the government to abolish poverty."²⁵ Modeled after the 1932 Bonus Army, the Poor People's Campaign was to culminate in a tent city in Washington, D.C. that would remain until Congress passed legislation dealing with economic inequality in America. Dr. King's economic thinking was not only extraordinary for 1968, it is an economic message that would be just as radical in today's debates as it was then.

When King broke with Johnson administration and spoke out against the war in Vietnam, he was so far outside of the mainstream in his thinking, in fact, that a Harris poll taken in 1967 found only 25% of African American respondents and 9% of the overall population supported his antiwar position.²⁶ Like Kennedy and King, Rosa Parks is included in the story but in a form that she herself would

likely not recognize. The stubborn and useful myth of Parks as an accidental revolutionary, a quiet, dignified woman with tired feet—as opposed to a willful, strong freedom fighter—holds a dear place in too many Americans’ memory. The texts all fail to mention that Parks was receiving death threats at her home as early as 1947—when King was still an undergraduate at Morehouse.²⁷ Parks trained at the Highlander Folk School before Emmett Till’s murder awakened the rest of the country to the horrors of the American South. Moreover, we have Parks’ own words to correct the myth, words rarely found in the textbooks:

People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day...No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.²⁸

Parks was insistent that the world acknowledge her long record of resistance, saying, “Over the years, I have been rebelling against second-class citizenship. It didn’t begin when I was arrested.”²⁹

Colin Kaepernick is also part of a long, proud tradition in America of athletes and artists protesting and speaking out against injustice. The platform provided to these men and women has often been used to call attention to more than just a sport or a film. Jim Thorpe and the remarkable football team of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School came to represent the hopes and aspirations of American Indians across the country, particularly when they took on and defeated West Point in 1912. Coached by the legendary “Pop” Warner, the team “didn’t just change football,” author Sally Jenkins wrote, “They changed prevailing ideas about Indians.”³⁰ In 1920, Thorpe was elected as the first president of the American Professional Football Association (APFA)—which was renamed as the NFL in 1922. In the late 1960s, in response to censorship, the writing team at *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* sneaked a sly protest into their work routine—“the writers set a trap for the censors by instructing everyone—dancers, singers, even the camera operators and costumers—to roar with delight whenever anyone at rehearsals uttered the nonsense phrase ‘rowing to Galveston,’” recalled a historian.³¹ The dutiful censors at CBS were so unnerved by the “dirty laughter” that the ridiculously innocuous phrase was always edited out.³² From Muhammad Ali to Jack Johnson, from the subversion of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern*

Times to the psychedelic wanderings of John Lennon, athletes and artists have spoken out through, as well as apart, from their sport or art. They have challenged norms and prejudices and used their voices in much the same way that Kaepernick uses his now—to challenge, inspire, and change. They have included Sidney Poitier, Jane Fonda, Dolores Huerta, Marian Anderson, César Chávez, Joan Baez, and many, many more.

Empowering Students with History

Ordinary citizens taking action while striving toward that more perfect union is indeed the American civic ideal, yet the model is all but absent from our social studies texts, leaving students with the self-defeating belief that progress is bought by others, for others. Such a dim view of personal civic agency and investment leads to apathy and disillusionment. Summarizing sociologist Richard Flacks, Paul Rogat Loeb described the troubling phenomenon this way: “American society teaches us that history is made by others; it’s out of our hands.”³³ Yet American history was written by a myriad of authors, by men and women from all walks of life, driven in all manner of ways to secure, advance, or guarantee those freedoms for which we are rightfully grateful. Some of these men and women wore the uniform of the U.S. military, but many did not. That non-violent protest has come to be viewed as un-American and as an explicit rejection of respect for the armed forces is a result of so many of these average citizens’ battles being ignored by American history texts and teachers.

Kaepernick is a soft-spoken revolutionary. He is not the poet Ali was, and he lacks the presence of Jim Brown or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Perhaps that is why he has chosen to challenge through a gesture. The point is that Colin Kaepernick stands in a very long line of troublemaking agitators who force us to have the conversations we dread and to ask the hard and troubling questions. That he would be disagreed with is a given; that he could be called un-American is a farce. The silliness of the argument against Kaepernick—that in order to honor those who fought for our freedom we should resign those freedoms—is ludicrous on its face. But it remains troubling that we have come to reflexively define “those who have fought for our freedoms” as only the military. Yet it is easily

understandable when one looks at how we portray the men, women, and movements—outside of the armed forces—that have battled for and secured liberty and freedom for Americans. Protest leaders and movements are portrayed as extraneous sidebars to the irrepressible march of progress that defines “American exceptionalism.” Lacking in both depth and agency, these portrayals fail to provide American students with the many examples of civic engagement and disorder that have furthered the cause of freedom and justice.

It neither diminishes nor demeans the sacrifice of our military to acknowledge the important roles of civic engagement and disobedience in the advances of freedom in America. It does not dishonor the service of the soldier to honor the protests of the citizen. We might even dare to hope that knowing about the citizens who have bent the course of history might inspire students to become involved and to work themselves for change. The paradigm we see displayed through the anger at Kaepernick suggests that the only way a young person can serve this nation and be a guarantor of future generations’ freedom is to join the military. Such is hardly the case. The list of ways a citizen may serve their nation is as endless as the myriad talents and skills we bring to the needs of our communities, and we must insist that this be made clear to our students. They might teach. Or drive people to the polls. Or march. Or organize. Or fundraise.

Or kneel.

Notes

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2. Mike Florio, "Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem," ProFootballTalk, 27 August 2016, <<https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2016/08/27/kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem/>>.
3. Jason Devaney, "Rep. Steve King on Kaepernick: 'Activism Sympathetic to ISIS,'" Newsmax, 13 September 2016, <<https://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/steve-king-kaepernick-activism-sympathetic/2016/09/13/id/748107/>>.
4. Nick Wagoner, "Ruth Bader Ginsberg Says National Anthem Protests are 'Really Dumb,'" ESPN, 10 October 2016, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17763208/ruth-bader-ginsburg-supreme-court-justice-says-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protests-really-dumb>.
5. Eric Branch, "49ers' Colin Kaepernick Transcript: 'I'll continue to sit,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 August 2016, <<https://www.sfchronicle.com/49ers/article/49ers-Colin-Kaepernick-transcript-I-ll-9189548.php>>. Transcript of interview reproduced in Joe Rivera, "Colin Kaepernick Answers National Anthem Controversy Questions in Detail: Full Responses," Sporting News, August 28, 2016, <<https://www.sportingnews.com/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-answers-questions-of-flag-controversy-national-anthem-san-francisco-49ers-nfl/r3j21qwzzk3u1ekdkgx05vnj4>>.
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7. Branch, "49ers' Colin Kaepernick Transcript."
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9. Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *United States History* (Boston, MA: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2009), 590.
10. John M. Murrin, Paul E. Johnson, James M. McPherson, Alice Fahs, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg, *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, fifth ed. (Boston, MA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2008), 584.
11. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, 584.
12. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, 862.
13. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, 865.
14. Timothy Burke, "Nantz: 'They're Gonna Keep Kneeling as Long as They Have Cameras Right in Their Face,'" Deadspin, 13 October 2016, <<https://screengrabber.deadspin.com/nantz-theyre-gonna-keep-kneeling-as-long-as-they-have-1787779810>>.
15. Wayne King and John L. Napp. *United States History* (Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service Publications, 2005), 591.
16. Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History*, 900.
17. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, 584.

18. Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 24.
19. Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993), 193.
20. Edward R. Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 204.
21. Martin Luther King Jr., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 172-173.
22. Zaid Jilani, "Martin Luther King Jr. Celebrations Overlook His Critiques of Capitalism and Militarism," *The Intercept*, 18 January 2016, <<https://theintercept.com/2016/01/18/martin-luther-king-jr-celebrations-overlook-his-critiques-of-capitalism-and-militarism/>>.
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24. King, as quoted in Jilani, "Martin Luther King Jr. Celebrations."
25. Joseph Rosenbloom, *Redemption: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last 31 Hours* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 86.
26. Jilani, "Martin Luther King Jr. Celebrations."
27. Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), 29.
28. Rosa Parks, as quoted in Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), 62.
29. Parks, as quoted in Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life*, 68.
30. Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans: The Team that Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 6.
31. David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (New York: Touchstone, 2009), 260.
32. Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 260.
33. Paul Rogat Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 48.