

# What Can We Learn from Colin Kaepernick?

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In the new America, an angry, divided place in which shouting has replaced listening, free speech has been reduced to a Constitutional right guaranteed only by those who agree with what you have to say. That seems to be a dangerous road to travel. Take the case of Colin Kaepernick.

The National Football League season begins this week and with it the conversation about the San Francisco 49ers quarterback's national anthem protest will heat up. Hopefully, the bitter tone of that debate will cool down and we revisit the liberties promised by the Bill of Rights.

The intense response to Kaepernick's decision not to stand during the anthem to protest police violence against minorities shows how social media has changed the way we handle our differences. The knee-jerk reaction has become the norm.

The purpose of protests like Kaepernick's are twofold: First, to take a personal stand – a right we all have – and secondly, to provoke public conversation – a process we should all desire. But instead of dialogue we have name-calling.

Let's forget the specific matter for a moment – violence between police and minority communities – and simply focus on the action by Kaepernick. He broke no law; he merely broke with tradition. Players are not required to stand during the national anthem.

And he was not devaluing the work of anyone in uniform. He was saying we need is a national conversation about the interaction between law enforcement and minority communities.

Who can argue with the fact that both sides need to understand the other better?

But in today's world, anyone with a laptop, a smart phone and a twitter account has a public platform on which to rant about anything they want and rip anyone they want, frequently with little thought and even less information.

How far we have fallen.

"I disapprove of what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it," said the English writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall in 1903. That's a noble sentiment we seem to have lost. Just ask the Dixie Chicks.

Among the dangers in all this is that things change. What's right today is left tomorrow. And vice versa. If we don't defend freedom of expression for everyone we risk having it for no one.

In the late 1960s, political activist Abbie Hoffman wore an American flag shirt on The Merv Griffin Show. The network blocked out his upper body because the shirt was deemed to be disrespectful. Today, it's considered patriotic to wear clothing depicting the flag; just wait until the Ryder Cup in a few weeks. Many will have on items like what Hoffman was vilified for wearing 50 years ago.

At around the same time Hoffman was being censored, the boxer Muhammad Ali was widely despised for his opposition to the Vietnam War and his support of black rights. Earlier this year, he died a beloved figure widely admired for the courage of his convictions.

The point is that things change; as a nation we evolve. We always have. And that evolution almost always involves a fight.

In my lifetime, segregated public schools were legal; In my lifetime people were blacklisted from their profession because of the meetings they attended; In my lifetime, the Professional Golf Association had a "Caucasian Only" clause.

And the end of those practices did not come about without protests. Some even died for their beliefs. Living up to the ideal of free speech has always been a challenge. But in our bitterly divided land it seems crucial right now.

Our values are tested not in good times, but in bad times. It's when we disagree intensely that we find out if we truly believe in freedom of expression and the right to challenge authority.

Still, any defense of Kaepernick under the cover of freedom of expression has its limits. There is a key point frequently lost in this discussion, one that involves a price Kaepernick might have to pay.

Freedom of speech does not mean you are free from the consequences of your words. Once you say them, you own them – and you own the repercussions.

Kaepernick has every right to express his beliefs. At the same time, his employers – specifically the 49ers and more broadly the NFL – have the right to fire him if they feel his words or actions are bad for business.

While every employee has the Constitutionally protected right to publicly express, for example, a racist belief, every employer has the right to fire that person if it believes the words are bad for its corporate image. Freedom is more than a two-way street – it is a traffic circle with many entry and exit points.

But while free speech does not mean you are free from the consequences of your words, it should mean you are free from being called names and threatened with attack.

Was it fair for Kaepernick to bring his team and his teammates into his protest? Could he have chosen a target less emotional than the national anthem? Those are valid questions. But the purpose of protest is to call attention to an issue. Whether his action was bravery, fool-hearted or both will be answered by time. In the short term, the 49ers win. Sales of Kaepernick merchandise has spiked up.

I do believe it is not only the right but also the responsibility of everyone – no matter what their job – to take a position on issues that matter. That's what going to the ballot box is all about. We all matter.

Our voices must be heard – all of our voices. That's how we get better as a society. And we should respect what we hear, even when we disagree. Name-calling never changes minds – conversation does.

Let's hope Colin Kaepernick has started an important conversation, not just about police and minorities but also about the freedom of expression on which our country was founded.