

From the PES Confronting Racism Task Force:

“Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel” - Samuel Johnson

By Erik Younge

It all started in 2016, when the San Francisco 49er starting quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the playing of the US national anthem before a pre-season football game. He explained his position. “I am not going to stand 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.” Colin vowed to continue to protest until he “feels like the flag represents what it is supposed to represent.”

Since then, it has exploded as an issue that has polarized this country. Colin Kaepernick has since been joined by hundreds of Black athletes across sports lines, including many white allies. Most of the debate has been along clear divisive racial lines. A NFL poll in 2016 showed that 37% of “Caucasians disliked Colin K a lot”, while “42% of African-Americans liked Colin a lot.” Many military veterans (mostly not vets of color) have taken exception to the protest of the anthem, seeing it as disrespect to the flag and “to their military service for this country.” Of course, we remember the firestorm that the current occupant of the White House ignited this September when he called for the firing of any athlete that didn’t stand for the anthem and the flag. In response, hundreds of players in the NFL locked arms, took a knee or stayed in the locker rooms after those typically insulting ignorant comments were made.

I personally haven’t stood for the anthem since 1969, when I was targeted for service in Vietnam. I was pushed to read and remember the words of the great Frederick Douglass in his July 5, 1852 speech, “The Meaning of July 4th for the Negro”. Even today, it rings with brutal honesty and morality. I urge all to read it and reflect on its timely message.

At subsequent ball games and other public events, when I remained sitting or lounging during the national anthem, there were occasions when other folks looked at me askance, some puzzled, worried, taken aback. Some had anger in their eyes, ready to cuss me out or even ready to beat me “upside my nappy black head”. It was strange to me. I left them alone in their “patriotism”, but they seemed to be offended by my actions.

The current protest has forced me to research the anthem in greater detail. Who was Francis Scott Key? What does the US anthem really have to say? What does it all mean?

First, Key was a slaveholding lawyer from an old Maryland plantation family that profited from slave labor and grew rich and powerful. Key harbored clearly racist concepts. He stated that Africans in American “are a distinct and inferior race of people, which all experience proves to be the greatest evil that afflicts a community.”

Key defended slavery and attacked abolitionists during his life. His poem, written September 13, 1814 is nothing but a fake poem praising the men fighting not against slavery, but defending

the attack of the British in Baltimore harbor. Abolitionists knew the real Key and "his poem", and said that it should read, "America was truly the land of the Free and Home of the Oppressed." For myself, protesting the anthem by Key is a worthy act, a revolutionary act; it is honest, heartfelt, and based on the author and his racist views, actions and words.

Saluting a flag or an anthem that defends the most inhumane and brutal system of oppression is not in my or my peoples' blood. African-Americans died in the millions not for some anthem, but gave their lives and bodies defending people, defending human beings, defending women, men and children from all kinds of oppression.

To me, people are the greatest resource any country possesses. I join with my soul brother Colin K. and his brave protest. He is continuing to talk the talk and walk the walk, even at personal risk. He is currently out of a job, despite being among the top at his job. I am boycotting (probably for life) the NFL and its systematic racism and cowardice. I don't need it! I join with all the brave women and men of all races who are taking a stand against oppression, murder, cowardice and racism.

Take a knee. Boycott the NFL. By doing so, you are truly standing up for the ethics and morals of the beautiful people of the US. Peace.