Colin Kaepernick and the Radical Uses of “The Star-Spangled Banner”

By William Robin August 29, 2016

Colin Kaepernick’s refusal to stand during “The Star-Spangled Banner” is only the latest chapter in the anthem’s long, polarizing history.

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In 1844, the abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator* published “A New Version of the National Song,” with lyrics by a man named E. A. Atlee. Although no music was printed, every reader would have known to sing Atlee’s text to the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” a thirty-year old song that—alongside “Hail, Columbia” and “Yankee Doodle”—was at the forefront of a list unofficial American national anthems. “Oh, say do you hear, at the dawn’s early light,” the new version opened. “The shrieks of those bondsmen, whose blood is now streaming. From the merciless lash, while our banner in sight / With its stars, mocking freedom, is fitfully gleaming The four verses, which are matched carefully to the contours and rhythm of “The Star-Spangle Banner,” describe slave ships waving “our star-spangled banner,” excoriate “our blood-guilty nation,” and conclude with the line “O’er the death-bed of Freedom—the home of the slave.”

On Friday night, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand while “The Star-Spangled Banner” was played before a preseason game. “I am not going to stand up

show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick said in an interview with NFL Media. "To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfi on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave a getting away with murder." Controversy erupted, reigniting discussions from Rio earlier this month, sparked when the Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas neglected to place her hand on he heart during the national anthem. (Douglas has stated that the gesture had no political motivation.) Inevitably, some writers questioned the merits of "The Star-Spangled Banner" its pointing toward the fact that its author, Francis Scott Key, was a slave owner. Indeed, the oft-overlooked third verse of Key's original text proclaims, "No refuge could save the hireling & sla / From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave."

Is "The Star-Spangled Banner" racist? The short answer is yes, insofar as almost every older piece of American iconography cannot be rid of the stain of slavery. But, too often, arguments about the anthem center on critiques of Key. Instead, we might better place Kaepernick's stan within a longer and more complicated history of figures such as Atlee who utilized "The Star-Spangled Banner" as a vehicle for proclaiming dissent. Even before it officially became our national anthem, dissidents were using "The Star-Spangled Banner" to point out incongruities between the song's claims and America's reality. Understanding the song as it has been sung moves us beyond the politics of one man and toward comprehending how the anthem has functioned as a powerful articulation of citizenship.

The politically tangled story of "The Star-Spangled Banner" began several decades before Key witnessed the Battle of Baltimore, during the War of 1812, and penned his stirringly martial te celebrating American resilience against the British. Around 1776, the English composer John Stafford Smith wrote the tune "To Anacreon in Heaven" for the Anacreontic Society, a British gentlemen's club that gathered regularly for dinners and concerts. (Despite its original text praising the bacchic Greek poet Anacreon, the tune was meant to be performed during society meetings by a trained virtuoso and was not, as is often presumed, a "drinking song.") "The Anacreontic Song" quickly found success, and numerous writers contributed texts designed to Smith's melody. This was a typical trend in popular song from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries: new lyrics were frequently printed for preëxisting music. By the time that Key decid to write his lyrics for "The Anacreontic Song," it was already a staple of American musical life. Nine years before he wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner," in fact, Key penned a patriotic song t for the tune titled "When the Warrior Returns."

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, "The Anacreontic Song" emerged as a vehicle for voicing partisanship in the new United States. "For the Commemoration of the Glorious Fourteenth of July," the first known U.S. setting of Smith's music, in 1793, agitated for Americ aid for the French Revolution. Federalists responded with "To Genêt in New York," which advocated that the French Ambassador, Edmond-Charles Genêt, be hung. And before Key's

"Banner" the most well-known version of "The Anacreontic Song" was "Adams and Liberty," i 1798, an attempt to win support for John Adams during his contentious Presidency.

The day after Key arrived back in the Baltimore harbor, his lyrics for "The Anacreontic Song" were printed as a broadside titled "Defense of Fort McHenry," and entered newspapers soon after. In the fall of 1814, Baltimore's Carrs Music Store printed the first sheet-music edition of Key's text alongside Smith's tune, newly rechristened "The Star-Spangled Banner." By 1837, th diarist George Templeton Strong wrote that, in New York City, "A lot of tipsy loafers are just going past, screaming out 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the top of their lungs, and in all sorts diabolical discords. But it sounds gloriously. It's a glorious thing altogether—words and music no matter how it's mangled."

Even as the anthem settled into the American patriotic canon, though, it remained a malleable entity. Alongside abolitionist texts like Atlee's, temperance advocates published castigations o alcoholism to the tune: "Oh! who has not seen by the dawn's early light / Some poor bloated drunkard to his home weakly reeling." And Key's roots in Maryland and his legacy as a slaveholder overshadowed Civil War battles about the song, as both the North and South foug for the right to the anthem. Some Confederates, despite adopting their own flag, expressed reluctance to let go of the musical stars and stripes. "Let us never surrender to the North the noble song, the 'Star-Spangled Banner,' " read an 1861 editorial in the Richmond *Examiner*. "I Southern in origin, in sentiments, in poetry, and song."

In the wake of the Civil War, the "Banner" became the de-facto national anthem, favored over "Hail, Columbia" and "Yankee Doodle" for solemn flag-raising ceremonies. By that point, the tradition of standing for the anthem—the one that Kaepernick powerfully opposed—had emerged. The song was officially declared the national anthem of the United States in a congressional bill in 1931; in recent decades, Smith's music and Key's text have remained close coupled, seemingly inviolable as nationalist doctrine. Instead, dissenters have sought to challenge the anthem in new forms. A year after Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their f in support of the Black Power movement during the playing of the anthem at the 1968 Olympi Jimi Hendrix transformed it into a searing guitar solo at Woodstock, and was chastised for committing the musical equivalent of flag-burning. Though the epochal Woodstock "Banner" i often viewed as a singular countercultural moment, the "Banner" historian Mark Clague has traced more than sixty performances of Hendrix's "Banner" over a two-year period, an evoluti closely aligned with the guitarist's growing political awareness. Clague calls it "psychedelic citizenship." And, as Cinque Henderson wrote earlier this year, Whitney Houston's triumphar virtuosic 1991 rendition may have helped reclaim the song for black Americans otherwise skeptical of Key's militaristic words.

If the Broadway musical “Hamilton” has shown us anything, it is that our national symbols ar always more complicated than their origin myths. If we shift the conversation from Francis Sc Key toward the rich history of “The Star-Spangled Banner” as it has been created and re-creat over the past two centuries, we can see Kaepernick as an heir to a lineage of musical defiance. Perhaps we should build on the raised fists and refusals to stand, and seek out the spirit of the era in which the anthem’s text and music were not so sacrosanct. We might consider once aga appending the two verses that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., added following the outbreak of wa in 1861, in which he anticipated emancipation and imagined a more just future—the anthem a aspirational rather than descriptive: “By the millions unchained who our birthright have gain We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained; And the star-spangled banner in triumph sh wave / O’er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.”

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