

The Multivocal Power of Sports

The Power of Sports

Aaron L. Miller

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After the summer's hurricanes, fires, and North Korean nuclear provocations, the autumn return to football might have been exactly what we needed. But the current National Football League (NFL) season is showing that our nation's politics are just as tumultuous as Mother Nature.

This season's controversy actually began last summer, [when Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers began kneeling during the national anthem to bring attention to racial brutality of people of color by the police.](#)



Washington Redskins teammates during the national anthem before a game against the Oakland Raiders at FedExField on September 24, 2017 in Landover, Maryland. (Keith Allison)

[President Donald Trump inserted himself into this conversation](#) on September 22nd, 2017, when he whipped up a crowd in Huntsville, Alabama by saying: [“Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when someone disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off this field right now! Out! He’s fired!’”](#)

NFL players (e.g., [Michael Bennett](#) and [Brandon Marshall](#)), whole NFL teams (e.g., [Pittsburgh Steelers](#), [Seattle Seahawks](#)), NFL analysts (e.g., [Howie Long](#)), and even NFL executives ([Denver Broncos CEO Joe Ellis](#)) and owners ([New England Patriot's owner Robert Kraft](#)) responded by expressing their support for athletes' rights to use their position to speak their minds. [As a league, the NFL is currently weighing whether they will amend their employee policy on standing for the anthem](#), while the NFL Commissioner, on October 10, 2017, said that the NFL owners he represents collectively want these "protests to move toward progress".

[Trump has continued his criticism of the NFL](#), arguing that players who kneel for the anthem do not respect "our American heritage" and that NFL owners have handled the situation poorly. Vice President [Mike Pence also walked out of an NFL game, apparently upon Trump's request](#).

But neither Trump nor Pence seem to understand that the flag, the anthem, football, and even Kaepernick's initial act of kneeling itself, are all what the Victor Turner called multi-vocal symbols: symbols that are "[capable of more than one interpretation, hence becoming a possible cause of conflict, as different groups attempt to have their particular definition adopted as the standard.](#)" Turner argued that multi-vocal symbols have three dimensions: the *exegetic*, how a symbol is explained by insiders; the *operational*, how participants use a symbol; and the *positional*, the relation the symbol has to other relevant symbols.

Historically, many NFL insiders have described the flag and nation anthem as sacred symbols that should go unquestioned. Members of this League would not dare challenge how participants used these symbols. The position of these symbols is essential to their value: Both the flag and national anthem represent a love of country and by extension a deep respect for those who have defended it.

For Turner, symbols were also the building blocks of ritual. He suggested that these symbols-cum-rituals enable society to reproduce itself, its values, and its formational myths. In other words, without ritual respect paid to the flag and the anthem, "insider" Americans might begin to question what "America" is, and whether it can continue.

Kaepernick's protest challenged these building blocks of national ritual, which is precisely why this issue has become so contentious.

In the year since he first kneeled, Kaepernick's message itself has become muddled in, or perhaps muddled by, the media. Some critics have argued that the Kaepernick and his followers do not "really understand" what the flag represents. It's about the "first responders" to the 2001 9/11

terrorist attacks, about the military, and about those to whom we owe “everything”, they say. These critics include former NFL football players like [Anthony “Booger” McFarland, who argued, on the 16th anniversary of 9/11](#), that athletes refusing to stand for the anthem disrespected the flag:

Some people say it's just a flag but no, it's what the flag represents. It's what the people represent. ... [After 9/11] the national anthem meant so much more—it meant a ton more. You're proud to be an American, especially when somebody tries to knock you down. When you listen to the Star Spangled Banner... when you hear the words 'United We Stand' they mean a lot more especially after events like that.

By contrast, [sportswriters like Dave Zirin and sociologists like Harry Edwards have suggested that Kaepernick's kneeling during the anthem was an act of civil disobedience, and that the widespread “solidarity” and “brotherhood” exhibited by members of the NFL in response to Trump's attacks were unprecedented](#). For his part, Kaepernick himself has said that the initial protest was not about the flag but about what the flag represented, and whether its ideals were being realized by the people who make up the nation:

I have great respect for the men and women that have fought for this country.... People are dying in vain because this country is not holding its end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everyone.

For Kaepernick, these symbols of America meant little the country did not live up to its stated values of freedom, justice, and liberty for all.

Applying Turner's concept of multivocal symbols to Kaepernick's kneeling, and the ensuing debate, might help us all better understand this political fire, and why it is now raging through US sports. Trump and Pence, like McFarland and other critics, want these games to continue to operate as symbols of a nation faithful to its police, military, and, by extension government, but also to its very core essence. On the other hand, the players who have protested, and many of their sympathizers outside the League, [including this author](#), see this pre-game ritual as an opportunity to express what they believe that no one should take away.

Perhaps passions simply run higher when the topic is patriotism, and perhaps when passions run high, logic runs low. Whatever the case, Kaepernick's initial protest, and all of the protests that have followed it, have upended not only the logic of the American sports-world but also the logic of American politics. After all, aren't presidents supposed to be unifiers?

In many respects, the NFL protests have become yet another lightning rod in the so-called “culture wars” that already divide our nation, wars which, in my humble opinion, would be far less destructive if more of our leaders understood multivocal symbols, how they operate, and how they relate to other symbols.

And wouldn't we all be better off if we all understood that the way *we* look at the flag or listen to the national anthem is not the *only* way someone can look at the flag or listen to the anthem?

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In this monthly column, “[The Power of Sports](#),” Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.

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