

O Say Can You See . . .

by Larry Lester

The American flag is for all Americans, not a privileged few. Among the things the flag represents is the right of all Americans to peacefully protest as they deem appropriate. Did you know that one can burn the American flag without being prosecuted? Yep, you are protected by the first amendment. So why the uproar about some folks refusing to put their hands over their hearts and stand at attention? There is no language in the constitution that says we must stand, sit or kneel during the playing of the national anthem. It is not a crime!

The players are kneeling in a peaceful protest. We kneel before kings and queens in some countries. We kneel at the altar. We kneel when we propose to our significant other. So why is this action so threatening to some? Perhaps it is not aligned with your beliefs and values. And that's okay. That's your right to protest the protest. The NFL players are not burning the flag, grabbing their crotches, or giving it the finger. It is a peaceful protest, whether we agree or not, to raise awareness about police brutality and racism in our country.

It is through protests, sit-ins, boycotts, picket lines and the free press that the masses are forced to address racial inequalities and social injustices in this country.

It begs the question, how is kneeling disrespectful to the flag? We wear baseball caps and shirts emblazoned with the American flag. And we love Captain America with his red, white and blue star-studded shield in film. Meanwhile, some NFL teams stretch the American flag in a horizontal position across the field before the game. All three actions are in violation of the National Flag Code of 1923.

Meanwhile neo-Nazis and white supremacist groups proudly wave the confederate flag in our faces. A thirteen-star flag that represents 11 confederate states and two slave states, Kentucky and Missouri. Despite this flag's rightful historical place, it is now linked to hate groups. Why would anyone want to be associated with a symbol of failure, hate and division? Please tell me why.

As anyone with a fifth-grade education knows, the 13 states represented in the confederate flag are included in the American flag. So why do we need a second flag? Really! It represents second place. Who honors second place? There are no silver medalists depicted on boxes of Wheaties. The runner-up teams in the Super Bowl, the NBA finals or the World Series are not invited to the White House. To flutter a confederate flag atop state capitol buildings and at car rallies, is disrespecting our American flag. The real flag represents the UNITED States of America; all states, not some, in a UNITED way.

Yes, we pledge allegiance to the flag, but the flag has not been allegiant to all Americans, especially minorities. Colin Kaepernick voiced his concerns about police brutality against minorities. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color," Kaepernick said. "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."

There was never any mention by Mr. Kaepernick of not honoring the military soldiers who fought to protect his freedom to speak and protest. So why are the haters focused on Colin's non-message? Perhaps we are embarrassed by his truth that makes us feel uncomfortable. Are we the "Man in the Mirror," so elegantly sung by Michael Jackson?

"I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place . . ."

Historically, it takes agitation to move the needle forward and to cleanse the sin. And that's what Kaep and these sons of magnificent mothers are trying to do.

Speaking of the military, a U.S. Army lieutenant named Jackie Robinson, wrote in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*, "I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag. I know that I am a black man in a white world." Robinson wrote, in 1972, that despite developing authentic friendships with some of his teammates, and feeling genuine love from many fans, he had never stopped feeling like an outsider in his own game, and in the country he proudly served. Wow, that was 45 years ago. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The year before Robinson's book, Marvin Gaye released his signature album *What's Going On* and sung about trigger-happy policing. He begged, "Don't punish me with brutality . . . Come on talk to me . . . So you can see . . . What's going on."

And dang it, it is still going on! Gaye's political commentary should make us wanna holler and throw up (both our hands).

Do we have to be of common color to reach common ground? In the words of Atticus Finch (*To Kill A Mockingbird*), "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." At times, our lack of empathy for others prevents us from checking our moral compasses.

I close with lyrics from Teddy Pendergrass of the Blue Notes, "Wake up everybody . . . no more sleepin' in bed . . . No more backward thinkin' . . . time for thinkin' ahead." Yes, it time to stop stinking thinking and start thinking ahead. Now is the time to do a checkup from the neck up. Look in the mirror.

It is time to identify and confront the flaws in our American democracy and correct the social and racial injustices that permeate our government and society. Perhaps the anthems by Jackson, Gaye, Pendergrass and others will encourage a call to action. Where do you stand or kneel on this issue?

