

Protests

I have been thinking about protests lately—largely in response to the NFL national anthem controversy, which has left me wondering about the most effective way to protest. How do you draw attention to a cause without alienating your audience, and how do you prevent your message from being hijacked?

I have never been much of a protester. A group of us tried protesting once in medical school when our tuition was increased, but our feeble efforts accomplished nothing. I suppose my background didn't help: growing up in southern Wisconsin in a little Norwegian American town, I learned that when things are not going the way you like, you should just suck it up. So, I am the last person you want organizing your next protest.

The NFL controversy started when the San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick opted to remain seated on the bench during the national anthem. He stated he was protesting the police treatment of people of color in the United States. He did draw attention, but more to himself than to his cause. A common reaction (and I am paraphrasing) was, "How dare he disrespect the United States of America, the greatest country on earth, which has given him everything he has in life? How could he be so ungrateful?" Then, the reaction turned to (again, paraphrasing), "How dare he disrespect the military, and the troops who risk everything to protect our freedoms?" It was sort of guilt by association. The idea was that remaining seated during the anthem meant you disrespected the flag, which meant you disrespected the country, which meant you disrespected the military, which meant you disrespected the troops. The point of the protest was hijacked. Kaepernick went out of his way to say his protest had nothing to do with the military or the troops who serve. He also took the advice of a military veteran who recommended that he kneel rather than sit during the anthem. These steps had little effect, however—the hijacking was complete.

We have seen this before. During the Iraq War (you know—the one where we found all those WMDs), members of Congress who supported the effort started wearing buttons displaying the words "I support the troops" as a way of shaming anyone opposed to the war. The implication was that if you opposed the war, you didn't "support" the troops. I found that rather annoying. Were they saying they supported the troops so much that they were willing to have them be killed for no good reason? If that is their idea of support, I would rather go unsupported.

Anyway, back to football. Colin Kaepernick is currently out of the NFL. He was a free agent this past off-season; he had become so toxic that no NFL team would put him on its roster. Actually, he turned out to be a rather bad spokesperson for his cause, in my opinion. After the 2016 presidential election, when asked about his choice, Kaepernick indicated he had not voted. I was somewhat uneasy about his protest in the first place, but that is when he completely lost me. If you are not going to exercise your right to vote, your credibility is shot. Time to get a new spokesperson.

Other players have adopted the protest, leading President Trump to weigh in with a tweet on September 30: "Very important that NFL players STAND tomorrow, and always, for the playing of our National Anthem. Respect our Flag and our Country!" More hijacking. The players did not appreciate this, and even more took to kneeling. Some teams kneeled in "unity." The Dallas Cowboys kneeled before and then stood during the anthem. I found myself totally confused. What exactly were they unified about, and what exactly were they protesting? Now the fans are angry, the NFL image is suffering, and few people are even talking about police misconduct.

Which begs the question regarding the most effective way to protest. How do you get people's attention, draw some of them to your side, alienate as few as possible, and effect change? Again, I am no expert, so take the following advice with a grain of salt. I suppose one must garner a certain amount of attention to be effective. But it seems to me that the protest should be specific. If you are protesting police brutality, march in front of a police station—do not kneel for the national anthem. Do not be so broad that your message can become twisted into a test of patriotism. And finally—be credible. If you want to change something in your country, do not sit home on Election Day. It is the one day (possibly the only day) of the year when everyone is truly equal. If you blow that day, you have only yourself to blame for the rest of the year.

Until next month ...



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