Why NFL players' national anthem protests aren't working

*[W. James Antle III](http://theweek.com/authors/w-james-antle-iii)*

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Football is back — and with it the controversy over players kneeling during the pregame national anthem to protest racial injustices in America.

The number of NFL players who are participating in these demonstrations is [growing](https://www.si.com/nfl/2017/08/22/national-anthem-protests-list-players-kneel), even though the one who did the most to popularize them, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, is still unemployed. Green Bay Packers star QB Aaron Rodgers speaks for many when he [says plainly](https://www.si.com/nfl/2017/08/22/national-anthem-protests-list-players-kneel) that these two facts about Kaepernick are related.

At a time of rising tensions between police departments and the communities of color they are meant to protect and serve, NFL players' demonstrations are understandable. Football has supplanted baseball as America's national pastime. A league in which more than 70 percent of the players are black has access to a lot of white, conservative viewers who might otherwise be isolated from or indifferent to issues of police brutality and racial injustice. It's not exactly a mystery why so many NFL players want to push fans to confront these uncomfortable issues.

But right or wrong, the pregame protests ultimately boil down to a question of tactics. Are these protests actually increasing sympathy for the plight of young African-American men among these white, conservative viewers? Anecdotal evidence from social media and NFL comments boards, [polling data](https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/poll-majority-of-americans-disagree-with-colin-kaepernicks-protest/), and perhaps even the the [ratings for the games](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/20171611/national-anthem-protests-no-1-reason-viewers-tuned-nfl-games) themselves suggest the [answer is no](http://www.sportingnews.com/nfl/news/national-anthem-protests-poll-colin-kaepernick-quinnipiac-university/l6yqhw0e0xtt1h7ukwmimc3y9).

One reason these protests may be failing to produce their intended effects is that for many older, conservative fans, even appearing to frame concern for racial justice vs. respect for flag, country, and the men and women of all races who serve in the police or military as a binary choice is actually offensive. Why must it be one or the other? The implication that this choice is zero-sum immediately turns off many fans.

Take Kaepernick himself. Once a popular quarterback with a racially diverse fan base who came close to winning a Super Bowl, he is now a lightning rod for controversy. People even argue about whether he should speak out against racism [while having white parents](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/31/colin-kaepernick-protest-racism-even-if-white-adoptive-parents). Enough hot takes have been written about him to replace coal as an energy source.

Here's mine: Kaepernick is out of football at the moment for reasons having to do with both his politics and his play. He was highly effective at gaining attention for these protests, but not at opening many minds among the general public. He took a polarizing stand while going 1-10 as a starter, a combination not likely to endear him to many teams.

Kaepernick isn't the electric player he showed flashes of a few years ago. But he is undeniably talented, and would be at least a backup somewhere if he hadn't become the public face of a movement for refusing to stand during the national anthem. At his best, Kaepernick is undeniably better than, say, the Jacksonville Jaguars' woeful quarterback duo of Blake Bortles and Chad Henne. But Kaepernick hasn't been his best in years. He had to fight to hold off Blaine Gabbert — a quarterback so bad he was replaced by Bortles in Jacksonville — to keep his job.

Unlike Kaepernick, star Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett isn't in any danger of losing his job, despite his own [explosive allegations](http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000839845/article/bennett-las-vegas-incident-a-traumatic-experience) against Las Vegas police, which he explicitly tied to his reason for sitting during the anthem. The same is true of Bennett's brother Martellus, a tight end for the Green Bay Packers, and New England Patriots safety Devin McCourty, both more [eloquent in their activism](http://theweek.com/articles/692955/president-trumps-patriot-problem) than Kaepernick and more effective on the field over the past two seasons.

Getting [more white players](https://thinkprogress.org/browns-anthem-protest-58e02e0d8a93/) to sit or kneel may make it easier for NFL athletes with less star power to engage in these protests and harder for [teams to punish them](https://www.si.com/nfl/2017/08/22/jerry-jones-players-protest-national-anthem-protest) (though all of the players mentioned above are black). But still, if the point of consciousness-raising is persuasion rather than publicity, football players protesting the national anthem is tactically unwise.

People who feel they are being unjustly treated are under no special obligation to make others comfortable. But arguments for equality have often had their greatest impact when they are presented as a fulfillment of our country's history and principles, not as something in opposition to them — the "true meaning of our creed" rather than a refutation of it.

This is especially important at a time when open racism [is resurgent](http://theweek.com/articles/665205/america-not-entered-new-era-rabid-racism). The main people who benefit from treating American patriotism as a latent form of white nationalism are white nationalists, not young black men rightfully fearful of encounters with the police. The anthem protests, by all appearances, are actually deepening the indifference and hostility to the situations of these young men.

NFL players have as much right to speak their minds in the way they see fit as anyone else. They can do so in a way that seeks to replicate the relative racial harmony that exists in many of their locker rooms — or in a way that makes their intended audience change the channel.

**Synthesize**: How does this article differ from the content we read last class? How has the author’s purpose changed?

**Highlight and Comment:** Find a line that is particularly poignant for you. Highlight it. Then, in the space below, please respond to it.