

WHAT IS AMERICA? WHO ARE WE?
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To kneel or not to kneel, that is the question. Should professional football players “take a knee” during the national anthem which contains the following altogether familiar lines:

And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O, say does that Star - Spangled Banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

President Donald Trump says “no,” the players should not kneel. And he says so in language that is as extreme as it is offensive. He criticizes the players who seek to draw attention to what they believe. And they believe that this country is riddled by social and racial injustice. And so they kneel to call attention to ... to dramatize ... this injustice. Against this protest President Trump has fulminated: “And wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘get that ... expletive deleted ... off the field right now. ... He's fired!’” Moreover, he encouraged fans to boycott NFL games. And, as we now know, this past weekend many players, coaches and owners kneeled, locked arms or stayed

off the field during pregame ceremonies. What will this coming Sunday's games bring?

But beyond the fulminations and the excesses, this controversy exposes a real problem and points to an important question. It is Trump's remarks that call attention to the question; but his implied answer is, in my opinion, not only wrong but also dangerously wrong. The question can be asked in at least three ways: What is the meaning of America? What do the flag and the national anthem represent? What does our physical stance during the Star Spangled Banner signify ... whether we stand erect or kneel? So, before we can judge the appropriateness of Trump's claim that kneeling "disrespects our country," we must know what our country *is* and what it *stands for*.

So, where should we look in order to discover "the meaning of America"? Where else than the documents that created America, that defined its meaning, that told us what we are as a country? And so I want to look at three of our founding documents: *The Declaration of Independence*, which was written in 1776, *The Constitution*, which was composed in 1787, and Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, delivered in 1863, an address which historian Garry Wills has called "the words that remade America."

The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence begins as follows: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That first sentence “... that all men are created equal ...” is that claim true or false? The answer: it is both. It is *false* ... all people are emphatically *not* created equal ... not equal in skin color, not equal in economic, sociological and family circumstances, not equal in natural endowment or opportunity or future prospects. The claim that all men are created equal is most certainly ... and empirically ... false.

But the claim that all men are created equal is also ... and equally emphatically ... *true*. Because every person in America is born with the same rights; and rights that are conferred, not by society or by other people, but “before” we were born, by “our Creator,” or, if you prefer, by virtue of their being born in America. And since these rights are not conferred by others or institutions, in a time *after* we are born, no person or institution or political arrangement can take them away. And the truth of the claim is not discovered by looking around, empirically. It is a premise, a principle, a belief. Now, if I have a right, you have an obligation. Rights are demands! And so, according to *The Declaration of Independence*, all Americans can

have the reasonable expectation to be able to live in a certain way ... a way that provides and enhances Life, Liberty and the opportunity to pursue Happiness. And what is the essential difference between what makes the equality claim false and true? It is false empirically ... in the way things *are*. Just look around and you will see factually that we are *not* equal. But it is true as a premise, as a principle of our country's founding; it is true idealistically, as an ideal, as a norm, of what *ought to be* the case. In this sense we all *are* equal ... and we all have a right to demand that we be given opportunities to pursue the goals that these rights imply. And it is the gap between fact and promise that arouses critique and criticism and action. If my way to the promise of America is blocked ... and blocked systemically, culturally and institutionally ... I have a right to protest and to call attention to the fact that this is an American problem. What then is America? America is not defined by race or class or demography or place or history; it is defined by its promise, by its stated goals, by the aspiration that is carved into its founding.

Now since America is essentially an idea and an ideal, until that ideal is reached, America is not yet itself. The key phrase here is "not yet." We are a people that is, at best, fundamentally "on the way." We are a pilgrim people involved in an adventure, in a process of becoming itself. And it the

nation that is on its way ... not just these or those individuals, not just these or those politicians, not just some states and not others. It is the nation that promises these things. This is the meaning of the opening of the Preamble to *The Constitution*: “We the People of the United States ... not We the People of the several states ... “We the People of the United States,” in order to form a more perfect Union ...”

And this is what Abraham Lincoln so brilliantly articulated in his Gettysburg Address, delivered at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery in November of 1863, just four and a half months after the end of The Battle of Gettysburg. Curiously, Lincoln’s was not that afternoon’s keynote address. That honor was accorded to a famous clergyman, former Harvard president, United States Senator and Representative, and Massachusetts governor, Edward Everett. Everett spoke that afternoon for two hours ... and a total of 13,000 words! When at long last he sat down Lincoln got up and delivered his address of a mere 272 words. It was all over before the crowd could readjust their hats! But in those 272 words Lincoln told us what America is. And Everett himself knew it; for the next day he graciously wrote to Lincoln the following note: “I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in

two hours, as you did in two minutes.” Here is the opening sentence of the Gettysburg Address:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

There you have it: what America is and what America means. America was conceived, created, defined back in 1776. Something new happened in Philadelphia. Not only was it created, conceived, it was “conceived in Liberty.” That is our essence and everything follows from there. Liberty, the freedom to pursue ... and to pursue with others on an equal playing field ... Life, Liberty and Happiness. And Lincoln goes on to say one of the most powerful and consequential of all his utterances: ... that this “new nation” is “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” America, in other words, is defined by a proposition, by an idea, by an “ought”, by an aspiration ... that same aspiration that *The Declaration of Independence* announced. Lincoln is proposing a remaking America right during the crisis of the Civil War. And he is implying that when America pursues its proper goals, America is America; when America fails to pursue its goals, America is failing to be America, failing to be itself. Then Lincoln proposes a challenge, a challenge to his contemporaries: “Now we are

engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” The civil war is a test ... a test of America’s resolve. Can it survive as America? For, as Lincoln says near the end of his address: “It is for us the living ... to be dedicated here to the *unfinished work* which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is ... for us to be here dedicated to *the great task* remaining before us” I don’t know about you, but I hear these words still streaming down through the years to this very day, as Lincoln calls out to *us* to dedicate ourselves to the unfinished work of America, to the great task remaining before us. America, Lincoln seems to be telling us, is always “on the way,” always “unfinished.” To think of America as something finished, something complete, something fully realized is to make an idol of our country. “Incompleteness” is our essence even as we must celebrate what we have already accomplished.

And just what *have* we accomplished so far in and through our ongoing national journey? How have we already been a foreshadowing of the real “America,” laying milestone markers on our way forward? Well, we did it when we abolished slavery and passed the three great Civil War amendments to *The Constitution*, though we retreated when Jim Crow replaced Reconstruction in the South and when forms of servitude persisted

in the North. We pushed the aspiration along when we did something else, which I will discuss in a moment. But first, I must backtrack a bit. Now, I am sure that many of you noticed that, when I was quoting our founding documents, I did not replace references to males only with more gender neutral language. I read: “that all *men* are created equal,” and “our *fathers* brought forth on this continent” I did this deliberately, not only for reasons of historical fidelity but also because in doing so, I could show the contrast between then and now, and the progress toward our aspirations we have made. For, at that time, America had not yet squarely faced up to the fact that *all* people have rights and that *both* men and women had a role in bringing forth the new nation. That was a blind spot back then. But, when we passed the 19th Amendment, enfranchising all American women after a nearly 100-year struggle, we demonstrated that we *do* have the capacity to move the real “America” further along toward its full realization. Women’s suffrage is an accomplishment of the real America. In this case, as in other cases, the dynamic America prevailed over the inertial America.

And this leads us to our two final questions: first, what, given all that we have considered, is the meaning of the flag and the national anthem? And, secondly, is Donald Trump right when he says that kneeling during the national anthem is a desecration of both flag and anthem and therefore a

deseccration of America itself? I'll answer the second question first: Donald Trump, in my view, is wrong ... though he does have a point. And so, what about the flag and the national anthem? To answer this question, I want to think about the difference between a sign and a symbol. What is a sign? A sign is something that provides information and often directs us to an action. A traffic light tells us to stop or go; a placard with a line through a picture of a cigarette tells us that this is a non-smoking area. Signs point to meaning but they do not embody that meaning. No one would criticize a city for taking down an outdated traffic light and trashing it. Or for taking down the No Smoking sign and simply and summarily throwing it away.

Now, a symbol is both like and unlike a sign. It is like a sign in that it points to a meaning and a use ... though these symbolic meanings and uses are most often deeper and more complex. But a symbol is qualitatively unlike a sign in that a symbol participates in, embodies, the meaning to which it points. A star of David, an eternal light, a Torah scroll ... and a flag and a national anthem ... these are symbols. How do I know this? Because, unlike the traffic sign, I cannot with impunity trash the Torah Scroll or the flag. I must treat them with respect, because, though the scroll and the flag point beyond themselves to a precious meaning ... to the presence of G-d, to the reality of the sacred, to America ... these symbols themselves participate

in, embody those meanings. So, I cannot treat the Torah Scroll merely as some piece of parchment or the Ner Tamid as simply another light or the flag as simply a piece of cloth with some red, white and blue configurations. That cloth and those configurations capture, materialize, make manifest, make palpably dramatic our country. This is where Donald Trump is right. Flags and anthems have status, meaning in their own right.

But here's the danger ... and the rub. Since a symbol ... the flag in this case ... embodies meaning, it is susceptible to being taken as *the whole* of the meaning. It is susceptible to the claim that the flag *is* America. But, if we succumb to the temptation to see the flag as not simply *participating* in a reality to which it points, but as standing *in* for that reality, as *being* that reality, then the flag and the national anthem become idols, something to be worshipped and venerated in and of themselves. But no symbol of a country whose essence is aspiration, is quest for the "not yet," can ever be taken as worship-worthy. America is fundamentally about the tension between what is and what ought to be. A material object or a song ... which is so present, so "right here-and-now" ... can easily blot out an aspiration that is not-yet, that is not present, not palpable but yearned for ... and this can lead us, consciously or unthinkingly ... to celebrate only what is. That is idolatry.

And I'm afraid that Donald Trump's criticisms are idolatrous. And that idolatry is deeply dangerous to our national well being.

Indeed, those football players ... and especially Colin Kaepernick who led the way ... those football players who kneel *do* rub against our sense of the dignity of the flag and the national anthem. But something more important is at stake ... not what the flag *is* but what the flag *points to*. In their kneeling ... as was also the case in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments and Martin Luther King's marches ... they are expressing their altogether justified conviction that America is not yet what it promises to be ... and what, with effort and resolve and a robust sense of the possible, it can be. But it is not yet. Whether it will continue to move toward its aspirations is, at this time as at all times, more a matter of hope than of certainty.

There is "an oft-told anecdote about an encounter between Benjamin Franklin and Elizabeth Powel. They met, so the story goes, as Franklin was leaving the Pennsylvania State House shortly after the Constitutional Convention had adjourned. According to Maryland delegate James McHenry, who claimed to have overheard the conversation, the lady asked Dr. Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got ... a republic or a monarchy? And Franklin's reply? 'A republic, madam, if you can keep it.'" (Richard

Beeman, *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution*, p.
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