**Prompt:** Read the below articles about Colin Kaepernick’s 2017 NFL protests. Using evidence from Martin Luther King Jr’s “A Creative Protest” as well as either Leonhardt’s column or Coates’ reply, explain the goal/purpose of protest and evaluate effectiveness of Colin Kaepernick’s protest in bringing awareness to race issues.

**The Choice Between Kneeling and Winning**

**By**[**David Leonhardt**](http://www.nytimes.com/by/david-leonhardt)Oct. 2, 2017



Civil rights activists carrying the American flag on the march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., in 1965.CreditCreditRobert Abbott Sengstacke/Getty Images

When a young organizer named John Lewis spoke at the March on Washington in August 1963, he [delivered](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFs1eTsokJg) a scorching rebuke of racism and its “political, economic and social exploitation.” But Lewis also did something else: He aligned his side, the civil rights movement, with the symbols and ideals of America.

The marchers would not rest, he said from the Lincoln Memorial steps, “until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete.”

It was a deliberate strategy. Even as the movement’s leaders raged, most justifiably, against their country’s oppression of them — and even as their enemies called them traitors — they cast themselves as patriots, the historian [Simon Hall](http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/14793.html) has noted. They urged the country to live up to its founding creed. They knew that by doing so, they gave themselves the best chance to win their fight.

In one of his first prominent speeches, during the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King Jr. [spoke of](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/the_addres_to_the_first_montgomery_improvement_association_mia_mass_meeting.1.html) “the glory of America, with all its faults.” At the March on Washington, King [described](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vDWWy4CMhE) not just a dream but “a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.” Before finishing, he recited the first seven lines of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” ending with “Let freedom ring!”

ADVERTISEMENT

A year-and-a-half later, marchers from Selma to Montgomery carried American flags. Segregationist hecklers along the route held up Confederate flags. Within six months, Lyndon Johnson had signed the Voting Rights Act.

Symbols matter in politics. They often matter more than the detailed arguments that opposing sides make. Symbols are a shortcut that help persuadable outsiders figure out where to line up.

The professional athletes doing political battle with President Trump are heirs to the civil-rights movement. They are protesting [government-sanctioned violence](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/) against African-Americans. Risking popularity for principle, they have shown a courage frequently lacking among the affluent and famous.

Trump, meanwhile, is heir to yesterday’s racist demagogues. He called an athlete “a son of a bitch” not long after saying that white supremacists included “very fine people.” (This weekend, he used an insulting stereotype against, of all people, Puerto Ricans.).

From a moral standpoint, this issue is clear. The athletes are right — and have every right to protest as they have. Trump is wrong, about the scourge of police violence and about freedom of speech.

But righteousness does not automatically bring effectiveness. And as someone who cheers when Stephen Curry or Von Miller speaks out and makes the president look small, I’ve reluctantly become convinced that many athletes are making a tactical mistake.

Yes, the athletes and their allies can make nuanced, genuine arguments about why kneeling during the national anthem is not meant as a rebuke to the entire country. Liberals have rallied to their side, almost uniformly. I have the same instinct.

Winning over blue America, however, is a pretty modest goal. The kneeling argument needlessly alienates persuadable people, and it’s one the athletes don’t need. Almost 70 percent of Americans get that the protests are directed at police violence or Trump and not the flag, according to [a YouGov/HuffPost poll](http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/tabsHPNFL20170925.pdf). Yet only 36 percent consider the kneeling protest to be “appropriate.”

Why? Because most Americans respect the country’s symbols and because standing is a simple sign of respect. You stand to greet someone. You stand at weddings and in church. You stand for ovations. Sitting while others stand sends a different message.

Beyond the athletes, there is a bigger question: Do Trump’s opponents want to oppose him in ways that are merely just and satisfying? Or do they want to beat him? “You can’t get angry,” as the longtime activist Vernon Jordan [has said](http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/18-mr-hollowell-didnt-like-that), describing a different civil-rights battle, in the 1950s. “You have to get smart.”

Getting smart means nominating progressive candidates who can win, even if they aren’t progressive on every issue. Getting smart means delaying internal fights (like single-payer health care) and unifying against Trump’s agenda (as Democrats in Congress have). Getting smart means understanding, as civil-rights leaders did, that American symbols are a worthy ally.

The athletes shouldn’t apologize for anything. Those who continue to kneel, and draw ire, deserve support. But the smart move now is not to expand a tactic that Trump loves as a foil. It’s to shift toward protests that don’t need a counterintuitive and distracting defense, while he gets to bleat on about America first.

The protests can still be aggressive — like the “I can’t breathe” shirts in the N.B.A., and much more. Trump, of course, will blast any protest as some version of uppity. But so what? The target audience are the many Americans open to opposing police violence and a bullying president — but uncomfortable with a gesture that seems to oppose America itself.

The athletes, after all, are the true patriots here, defending life, liberty and equality under the law. They’re also intensely competitive people. They are familiar with the idea of finding a way to win.

# Civil-Rights Protests Have Never Been Popular

Activists can’t persuade their contemporaries—they’re aiming at the next generation.

[**TA-NEHISI COATES**](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/ta-nehisi-coates/) **The Atlantic**

OCT 3, 2017

One common response to the national anthem protests originated by Colin Kaepernick is to disparage them as polarizing. Joe Scarborough, host of Morning Joe, summed up this particular critique in a tweet last weekend (9/24/17): “This may be unpopular but it is a political reality: Every NFL player refusing to stand for the national anthem helps Trump politically.”

The idea here is that kneeling NFL players are committing an act of such blatant disrespect that they hand Trump an easy image with which to demagogue. Often attendant to the idea that protesting players are shooting themselves in the foot is the notion that in some other era, black protest proved to be a unifying force that altered the psychology of some critical mass of open-minded whites.

David Leonhardt [offers a version](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/opinion/football-kneeling-winning-trump.html) of this in Monday’s New York Times:

In one of his first prominent speeches, during the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King Jr. [spoke of](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/the_addres_to_the_first_montgomery_improvement_association_mia_mass_meeting.1.html) “the glory of America, with all its faults.” At the March on Washington, King [described](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vDWWy4CMhE) not just a dream but “a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.” Before finishing, he recited the first seven lines of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” ending with “Let freedom ring!”

A year-and-a-half later, marchers from Selma to Montgomery carried American flags. Segregationist hecklers along the route held up Confederate flags. Within six months, Lyndon Johnson had signed the Voting Rights Act.

Leonhardt goes on to contrast this species of activism, which aligned “the civil-rights movement with the symbols and ideals of America,” with kneeling during the national anthem, which presumably signals opposition to those same symbols. Leonhardt is sympathetic to the aims of Kaepernick’s protest but he contrasts this “angry” approach with the “smart” approach of the civil-rights movement.

There’s a lot of ground covered in this column, and not all of it thoroughly. Leonhardt’s rendering of the civil-rights movement, for instance, implies a kind of direct and seamless chain of events, from the March on Washington’s invocation of American ideals, to growing white support, to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. This elides self-interested motives for civil-rights reform—the influence of the Cold War, the threat of urban rebellion—in favor of warm and fuzzy ones.

The trajectory of Leonhardt’s argument is doomed by the defective pad from which it was launched. The problem here is not just a just-so chain of events, but the actual effects of the events. Implicit in Leonhardt’s critique is the idea that Martin Luther King and other civil-rights pioneers, and their protests, were better able to appeal to the hearts of white Americans than Kaepernick and his allies. Leonhardt cites a Yougov poll showing that “only 36 percent consider the kneeling protest to be ‘appropriate.’” This might be damning if not for the fact that the very civil-rights movement Leonhardt cites was generally thought to be equally, if not more, inappropriate.

As The Washington Post[noted last year](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/04/19/black-lives-matters-and-americas-long-history-of-resisting-civil-rights-protesters/?utm_term=.a61f627a6132), only 22 percent of all Americans approved of the Freedom Rides, and only 28 percent approved of the sit-ins. The vast majority of Americans—60 percent—had “unfavorable” feelings about the March on Washington. As [FiveThirtyEight notes](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-nfl-protests-may-be-unpopular-now-but-that-doesnt-mean-theyll-end-that-way/), in 1966, 63 percent of Americans had a negative opinion of Martin Luther King. The popular hostility toward King extended to the very government he tried to embrace—King was bugged and harassed by the FBI until the end of his life. His assassination sprang from the deep hostility with which he was viewed, not by a fringe radical minority, but by the majority of the American citizenry.

That the civil-rights movement was unpopular is not shocking to the activists who protested at the time. “When I’m told by people, ‘Thank you for what you did,’ I almost want to look around and see who they’re talking to,” Joyce Ladner told the Post.[\*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/colin-kaepernick/541845/#Correction) The paper quotes Julian Bond satirizing the kind of history Leonhardt’s argument is premised—“Rosa sat down, Martin stood up and then the white folks saw the light and saved the day.”

Leonhardt is a smart and knowledgeable columnist. It is thus surprising to see him embrace a mythical rendition of the civil-rights movement that runs counter to the the facts and figures of the time. But Leonhardt’s column seems less interested in offering an accurate apprehension of the civil-rights movement than in employing the civil-rights movement as a club against radicalism in general, and the Bernie Sanders-wing of the left in particular:

Getting smart means nominating progressive candidates who can win, even if they aren’t progressive on every issue. Getting smart means delaying internal fights (like single-payer health care) and unifying against Trump’s agenda (as Democrats in Congress have). Getting smart means understanding, as civil-rights leaders did, that American symbols are a worthy ally.

Reading this you would think Blanche Lincoln was primaried, that Alison Lundergan Grimes was done in by her implacable leftist fanaticism, that Evan Bayh never ran in 2016, that Bob Casey wasn’t pro-life, that Joe Manchin wasn’t a senator. But more, you'd think that “smart” necessarily equated with “centrist.” In fact, the very history Leonhardt summons says the opposite.

Whatever symbols they embraced, civil-rights activists—much like black activists today—never successfully connected with the hearts of the majority of adults of their own day. The process was neither neat nor particularly unifying. In fact, it destroyed the Democratic Party of Roosevelt and Truman. But the activists did sketch a theater of violence, with men like Bull Connor in starring roles, that shamed and embarrassed the country. And aided by an intemperate radicalism within and the Cold War threat without, the activists were able to use that shame to affect meaningful change.

Perhaps most importantly they affected the attitudes of the children of those white Americans who scorned them. This points to the true target, in terms of white people, of Kaepernick’s protest. The point is not to convince people who boo even when a team kneels before the anthem is sung. The point is to reach the children of those people. The point is the future.

Kaepernick did not inaugurate his protest in hopes of helping elect more centrist Democrats, or any kind of Democrat. That said, he was not immune to compromise. When his initial efforts were met with disdain and deemed disrespectful, he actually consulted a group of veterans to see how he might better pursue a protest. That is [the origin of Kaepernick kneeling](https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/heres-how-nate-boyer-got-colin-kaepernick-to-go-from-sitting-to-kneeling/), and the fact that it too has been met with scoffs points to deeper problem. If young people attempting to board a bus are unacceptable, if gathering on the National Mall is verboten, if preaching nonviolence gets you harassed by your own government and then killed, if a protest founded in consultation with military veterans is offensive, then what specific manner of protest is white America willing to endure?

It’s almost as if the manner of protest isn’t the real problem.

***[TA-NEHISI COATES](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/ta-nehisi-coates/)****is a national correspondent for*The Atlantic*, where he writes about culture, politics, and social issues. He is the author of*[The Beautiful Struggle](http://www.indiebound.org/book/9780385527460)*,*[Between the World and Me](http://www.indiebound.org/book/9780812993547),*and*[We Were Eight Years in Power](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN%3D0399590560/theatla05-20/)*.*