



Steelers Shifting Take on Anthem Protests Illustrates Contradictions

When the Pittsburgh Steelers finally took the field at Chicago's Soldier Field for this past weekend's contest with the Bears, they faced a torrent of boos from the fans. This time the boos were not about them being there to play the hometown Bears, but rather their refusal to exit the tunnel for the playing of the National Anthem.



Steelers

Steelers Head Coach Mike Tomlin told a CBS reporter that his team would not participate in the National Anthem before Sunday's game, but would instead remain in the locker room until it was over. Tomlin explained his position: "You know, these are very divisive times for our country *and for us as a football team*, it's about us remaining solid." (Emphasis added.)

Tomlin's apparent solution was to have the entire team remain in the locker room until the conclusion of the National Anthem, so the team would not be divided over whether to stand or kneel during the playing of the "Star-Spangled Banner." As Tomlin said, "If you feel the need to do anything, I'm going to be supportive of that — as Americans you have that right. But whatever you do we're going to do 100 percent, we're going to do together." Apparently, that "right" did not extend to taking the field and honoring the country.

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This attempt to bridge the divide on the Steeler football team by remaining inside the tunnel during the playing of the National Anthem illustrates the contradiction inherent in the decision. Tomlin evidently thinks dictating that all players do the same thing on the National Anthem is unity, but it could better be described as uniformity. Before the recent incidents, *all players* stood during the playing of the National Anthem. There was uniformity because it was understood that they represented a business that wants all fans, regardless of political views, in the seats or watching on television.

The leader of the Pittsburgh Steelers is clearly their quarterback, Ben Roethlisberger, and he has publicly questioned whether the team did the right thing by not coming out for the National Anthem. "I was unable to sleep last night and want to share my thoughts and feelings on our team's decision to remain in the tunnel for the National Anthem yesterday," Roethlisberger wrote on his personal website. "The idea was to be unified as a team when so much attention is paid to things dividing our country, but I wish we approached it differently. We did not want to appear divided on the sideline with some standing and some kneeling or sitting."

Roethlisberger clearly was uncomfortable with the perception left by the team remaining inside the tunnel — that the Steelers were somehow protesting against the flag, the Anthem, or the country. "As a



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team, it was not a protest of the flag or the Anthem. *I personally don't believe the Anthem is ever the time to make any type of protest.*" (Emphasis added.) Roethlisberger later added at a press availability that he wanted people to know that he supports the police, and that in "no way were we protesting the Anthem."

Despite Roethlisberger's statement, it is quite clear that the Steelers' actions *were* viewed by many fans as negative toward the flag, and what it stands for. And understandably so. After all, the kneeling protests during the playing of the National Anthem were originated by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who was very explicit in what he was doing. Kaepernick said at the time that his special beef was with the police: "Cops are getting paid for killing people." He explained further: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in *flag* for a *country* that oppresses black people." (Emphasis added.)

Steelers owner Art Rooney II also attempted to reassure fans that the decision to remain off the field during the Anthem was not meant to disrespect the military or the nation. "Our players have tremendous respect for the members of the military services, including their teammate Alejandro Villanueva," Rooney explained. "There was never any desire on the part of our players to show disrespect for our service members."

Villanueva was the Steelers player who could be seen standing just outside the tunnel during the playing of the National Anthem. His action was seen as courageous by many fans, and his jersey quickly became the best-selling jersey in the nation. Unfortunately, Villanueva evidently somehow got the impression that he had betrayed his teammates, coach, and owner, and has since recanted his action. "Unfortunately, I threw my teammates under the bus, unintentionally," Villanueva told a Pittsburgh TV station. Villanueva, a former Army Ranger who served three tours in Afghanistan, said, "Every time I see that picture of me standing by myself, I feel embarrassed."

What should be embarrassing are the weak explanations that the kneeling during the National Anthem is somehow not intended to disrespect the flag, the police, or the country, when that is exactly what Kaepernick said that he was doing.

Despite this, Seattle Seahawks Coach Pete Carroll likewise tried to distance his team's decision to not take the field during the playing of the National Anthem: "And (the focus) has been so directed at just the flag or just law enforcement or other thoughts, that's not all what the players are expressing. They're expressing freedom of speech and expression, and they have a lot to say and they're skilled at what they want to say and what they stand for."

As Rush Limbaugh said on his radio program today, this sounds like "gibberish." But it is not really much more gibberish than the explanations of Rooney, Roethlisberger, and Villanueva.



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