

PRO/CON: Standing for the Pledge of Allegiance

By David Jungblut and Ricky House, PBS NewsHour on 02.12.18

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Two students hold the American flag as the student body at Rocketship Si Se Puede charter public elementary school in California recites the Pledge of Allegiance in 2014. Photo: Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor via Getty Images

PRO: "Freedom" is why I ask my students to stand for the Pledge

As an educator, "Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance" was not a phrase I thought would ever come under scrutiny.

In my 28 years of teaching, and long before the NFL protests in recent months, students had shared reasons why they did not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, including religious reasons. I used these occasions as teaching moments to let students know that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteed the freedoms of religion and speech. I explained that many people had died in order to protect those rights.

While I believed the students were justified in their actions in these cases of religious liberty, I do not feel the same way when it comes to the NFL protests.

Last year, my final year as a high school teacher before retiring, I had two students who decided to take a knee during the Pledge of Allegiance. I wondered why and framed the question in a way they might not have expected.

“Who died for you that gave you the right to stand or not?” I asked.

“No one,” the puzzled-looking students replied.

“I think you are mistaken. Many service members died in order to protect our country and give us our freedom. Some of them may have been members of your family or mine.”

The students looked around and shook their heads. Yes, that teacher mode was now flowing. I felt it my obligation to let students know something personal about my life, something I hoped they would never forget.

I let them know that my father and all my uncles fought in World War II or the Korean War and that my brother-in-law fought in Vietnam and my son-in-law completed two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Personally, I did not serve, but I am conscious of the critical role the military has played throughout my 64 years.

For the past 29 years on Veterans Day and Memorial Day, I read my grandmother’s poem, “Our Son,” to my classes. It is about my mother’s brother, my uncle. He was married and the father of a 5-month-old son when he died at age 19 on July 20, 1944 (the same day an assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler was unsuccessful). Lester Bidewell wrote a letter every day to his parents and they knew that something happened to him when the letters stopped coming.

“You have the right to decide to stand or not or to take a knee, but you should know that people around you have strong feelings about the issues and made sacrifices for your freedom and your rights,” I recall saying.

Although I wanted the students to know how I felt, I also know that my teacher-knows-best-mode may not be a great strategy when you are trying to reach young people. I needed to try to understand the students’ point of view, and I think that made a difference with them.

The students explained that the football players were kneeling because of issues related to Black Lives Matter, including the deaths of several unarmed black men by law enforcement. They said they wanted to show their support for the movement and felt they were not disrespecting the flag because they were kneeling.

I told them that I understood and have had a number of students and friends who said they were frustrated to live in a society in which “DWB” (“Driving While Black”) was a crime.

But I also wanted them to see that the lives lost fighting for freedom in the American Revolution, the Civil War and the civil rights movement, should also be respected.

I wanted them to understand what they were doing and why, because freedom isn’t something we can take lightly.

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CON: I will not pledge allegiance until America does better

I have a bulletin board behind my desk with pictures of about two dozen African-American men and women who have lost their lives at the hands of police violence and white supremacy. They

include Malcolm X, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, Emmett Till and so many others.

I added the phrase “With Liberty and Justice for All” running across the bottom of the board. These words are the last words found in our pledge of allegiance, and yet they never seem to ring true for black Americans. This is the exact reason why I will no longer pledge allegiance to the American flag every day or stand for our national anthem.

How can I as a black educator have this bulletin board on my wall and make social justice a theme in my classroom each and every day and then get up and pledge allegiance to a country that has made it so clear that my life does not matter?

In a country where white supremacists have been emboldened by the current administration and black people, immigrants, Hispanics, and LGTBQ students have lived in fear every day for the past year, I realized it was completely disingenuous of me to stand for a pledge when the words do not apply to my life.

When I first started doing this, I wondered how my students would react. To be quite honest, many of them have also stopped standing for the flag and had stopped doing so before I did. One particular student told me when pressed about the issue, “I’m not standing with that man being president.”

My job as an educator is to give my students a voice. When they make a decision to stand up for what they believe in, I am not only in awe, but I am inspired.

I want my classroom to be a place where my students feel safe and empowered. It should be a place where I highlight the injustices that various groups around the world face on a consistent and constant basis. It should be a world in which I help my students come up with solutions on how to solve these problems.

I became an educator because I want my students to use what I teach them to go out and make this world a better place. And sometimes that means making the decision to stand up against what I believe is a societal wrong within my own classroom.

Many would argue that standing for the pledge of allegiance or the national anthem is disrespectful to the flag and to our nation’s veterans. What they fail to see is this has nothing do with the sacrifice that our nation’s veterans have made for this country.

By changing the narrative and saying that people who stand up for what is right are disrespecting the flag, they are removing the focus from the actual issue: systemic racism that goes unchecked as institutions are allowed to disproportionately abuse and discriminate people of color.

Colin Kaepernick made it very clear from the start that his protest was about the systemic powers that have led to the marginalization and abuse of African-Americans in this country.

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are not saying that white lives don’t matter. But we are acknowledging that black people are disproportionately impacted by police brutality and that we need to do something about it. We are acknowledging that systemic racism continues to rear its ugly head in many forms and these issues need to be addressed.

When people look at the decision to not stand for the flag with such a narrow-minded view, they are rejecting the very freedom that this country is supposed to represent. They also seemingly ignore the fact that this nation was built on the foundation of slave labor and by the conquering of land that was home to millions of native people. Both Native Americans and African slaves lacked rights and freedom and continue to fight for these rights today. While the explicit Jim Crow racism that denied African-Americans access to equal educational, public facilities and the right to vote no longer exists, we cannot deny that racism has taken a more implicit and systemic tone today.

I believe that this country has a lot of potential, but at this time it is not living up to that potential. Yes, I teach U.S. history and civics, but also aim to teach the whole child. That means teaching them to stand up for what they believe in and fight for justice. Until America does better, I will not pledge allegiance to a country that is complicit with racism and police brutality.

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Quiz

- 1 Which statement BEST reflects one of Ricky House's beliefs?
- (A) Donald Trump is directly responsible for an increase in violence against marginalized groups by law enforcement.
 - (B) Kneeling during the Pledge of Allegiance is unfair to the thousands of soldiers who have given their lives for the United States.
 - (C) Black Lives Matter is primarily concerned with economic equity for people of color.
 - (D) People who claim kneeling is disrespectful to the American flag are failing to see the larger issue of systemic oppression in the United States.
- 2 Which piece of evidence from the PRO article MOST appeals to the reader's emotions?
- (A) In my 28 years of teaching, and long before the NFL protests in recent months, students had shared reasons why they did not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, including religious reasons. I used these occasions as teaching moments to let students know that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteed the freedoms of religion and speech.
 - (B) "I think you are mistaken. Many service members died in order to protect our country and give us our freedom. Some of them may have been members of your family or mine."
 - (C) It is about my mother's brother, my uncle. He was married and the father of a 5-month-old son when he died at age 19 on July 20, 1944 (the same day an assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler was unsuccessful). Lester Bidewell wrote a letter every day to his parents and they knew that something happened to him when the letters stopped coming.
 - (D) The students explained that the football players were kneeling because of issues related to Black Lives Matter, including the deaths of several unarmed black men by law enforcement. They said they wanted to show their support for the movement and felt they were not disrespecting the flag because they were kneeling.
- 3 In the PRO article, how does the author's description of his family members who served in the military support his overall argument?
- (A) It demonstrates why he feels that the American flag is an important symbol.
 - (B) It demonstrates how most soldiers feel about kneeling during the Pledge of Allegiance.
 - (C) It demonstrates why his views on the Pledge of Allegiance have changed after becoming a teacher.
 - (D) It demonstrates how the freedom of speech can be used to protest peacefully.
- 4 Which aspect of the author's argument is MOST important in the CON article as a whole?
- (A) his description of the efforts of some people to discredit protesters as unpatriotic
 - (B) his explanation of the effects of racism and police violence on people of color
 - (C) his discussion about the efforts of teachers to work toward social justice
 - (D) his opinion about the effects of the Trump administration on race relations