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Student athletes who kneel during national anthem display the most vital American freedom | Opinion

The young men and women who engage in this silent protest of the ill-treatment of their fellow Americans, are acting in the best traditions of this country.

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Story Highlights

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East Tennessee State University's Men's Basketball team silently knelt before a game at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga on Feb 15.

By the end of the week, news of the players' actions had reverberated throughout Northeast Tennessee and attracted national attention.

State legislators representing the region and a plethora of local citizens jumped at the opportunity to attack ETSU and its basketball team for allegedly disrespecting the flag.

Even a member of the ETSU Board of Trustees expressed anger over the players' decision to exercise their 1st Amendment rights.

Consequently, intense discussions, public and private, are ongoing about this incident and others like it in Tennessee and across the nation.

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Rich history of players using their platform

Athletes taking a knee became a national issue in August 2016 when then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the playing of the national anthem.

When asked about his decision, Kaepernick said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." Nate Boyer, a former Green Beret, told him that sitting would be disrespectful; however, he could kneel and still be respectful.

Kaepernick's decision was highly controversial, and it kicked off a debate regarding patriotism, racism, and the ways in which we use the 1st Amendment to address societal inequities.

The real issue Kaepernick and others were trying to address was violence perpetrated against Black Americans. Often this violence has come at the hands of police officers who were rarely charged with misconduct and, even rarer still, convicted for crimes against Black Americans. Professional athletes, recognizing the growing power of their voices, started using those voices to advocate for those without one.

Other Americans jumped at these peaceful incidents with anger and dismay.

According to these Americans, professional athletes were gravely wounded servicemembers and veterans dating back to the American Revolution.

These critics claim it is inappropriate to stand up for oneself and against institutional and systemic oppression when the anthem and flag are being appreciated.

The suggestion that players should just shut up and dribble go back a long way in this country.

Since the 1960s Black athletes have become more assertive and public in condemning bigotry and oppression.

Athletes such as Wilma Rudolph, Muhammad Ali, Magic Johnson and LeBron James have moved boldly to highlight the inequities within our society as well as to take steps to combat racism, inequality, and poverty.

Predictably, talk concerning ETSU centered around stopping players from kneeling before games.

What has happened in response to the basketball team's protest

More than two dozen members of the Tennessee Senate issued a letter to all chancellors and presidents across the state. The senators' letter informed higher education leaders that they should "adopt policies within your respective athletic departments to prohibit any such actions moving forward."

From Memphis to Mountain City, it was a chilling notice of the power of elected officials over public institutions of higher education, thus raising questions about what is the proper role of public universities in the lives of the American people.

Northeast Tennessee is a beautiful place to live. The mountains, farms, and low population density, combined with moderate climate and weather, make it a nice place to settle down and raise a family.

The region is served by East Tennessee State University, which is arguably the most important component in the workforce development, economic growth, and intellectual atmosphere of the region. ETSU, a public university, plays a vital role in educational attainment.

Historically, public universities have educated citizens for public service and advanced knowledge through research and innovation. Current societal needs have added to this mission by ensuring students have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute to the global economy and engage in a functional democracy.

In this role, the public university becomes what the famous educational reformer John Dewey claimed all schools should be—a laboratory of life, where students contend and grapple with solution to the problems of the day.

Our public institutions are about opening minds to possibilities, critical thinking, and positive action. These institutions teach students to question the world around them.

Universities actively engage students in critical, sometimes uncomfortable debate in order to build a healthy democracy built on respect for differences and commitment to shared values, not reducing democracy to a set of mindless acts by an unquestioning public.

Public universities recognize that when a team of student-athletes takes a knee during the National Anthem, it is a call to action.

The young men who engage in this silent protest of the ill-treatment of their fellow Americans, are acting in the best traditions of this country.

Knowing the backlash would come, ETSU's men's basketball team acted with dignity, respect, courage, and empathy. These are qualities we all desire in our neighbors.

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