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**5 REASONS WE STAND FOR THE FLAG**

**BY JANE HAMPTON COOK, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 09/29/17**

Why do Americans stand for the U.S. flag and the national anthem? In the midst of the NFL controversy over players who take a knee instead of standing for the national anthem, let us remember the many reasons why many of us stand for the flag and how it all began.

Americans have stood for the U.S. flag since June 14, 1777, the day the Continental Congress declared “[that the flag of the](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:./temp/~ammem_Os9N::) (thirteen) United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.”

Thirty-seven years later in Aug. 1814, the White House and U.S. Capitol lay in ashes after the British military burned the public buildings in Washington D.C. In the immediate aftermath, many Americans understandably feared that the Union Jack, the British flag, would soon fly over all of America again.

Hence, three weeks after the sacking of Washington, Francis Scott Key, a Maryland attorney who politically oppose the current president, was so moved at seeing the U.S. flag flying victoriously at the end of the battle for Baltimore’s Fort McHenry, that he wrote lyrics for The Star-Spangled Banner, the song we now call the national anthem.

**1. We stand for the flag today, not to please ourselves but to honor those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom.**

The more than [1.2 million Americans](https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf) who have died because of war. We stand for soldiers who initially inspired our national anthem, such as William Williams, [a runaway slave who later died after having his leg blown off](https://www.nps.gov/fomc/learn/historyculture/william-williams.htm) as part of the 38th U.S. Infantry at the Battle of Fort McHenry. We also stand for more recent heroes, such as Robert Kelly, the son of White House Chief of Staff [John Kelly](https://thehill.com/people/john-kelly), a marine lieutenant who died in a roadside bomb blast in Afghanistan in 2010.

“[I believe every American](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/dhs-secretary-john-kelly-remembers-his-son-finest-man-i-ever-knew/article/2624228), when the national anthem is played, should cover their hearts and think about all the men and women who have been maimed and killed. Every American should stand and think for three lousy minutes," John Kelly declared in response to the NFL controversy.

**2. We stand for the flag not to focus on what divides us but on what unites us, which is being an American.**

“[The name of American, which belongs to you](about:blank), in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles,” George Washington, our first president, declared in his farewell address in 1796.

The same is true today. More than being a New Yorker or a Texan or being a Steelers fan or Rams fan, the name “American” deserves our highest respect and pride. Standing for the flag and anthem at a sports game or other public gatherings, symbolically shows that we are all Americans, no matter our race or religion, no matter our preferred sports team, and no matter our political differences. Standing is the ultimate salute to sportsmanship.

**3. We stand for the flag not to pledge allegiance to a president, but to honor the reality that we have an elected president and not a lifetime king.**

By standing, we honor the fact that our country has had [45 presidents](https://www.presidentsusa.net/presvplist.html). Our flag reflects our system of government, divided by 50 states, the stars on the flag, but united under a federal government. The national anthem controversy in the NFL started during the term of our previous president and continues during our current president’s term.

**4. We stand not because of past or present pain caused by injustice, but to salute the principle of justice.**

This is one of the three definitions for the color blue that Congress gave us in 1782. [“The colors of . . .  those used in the flag](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:3:./temp/~ammem_w0qi::) of the United States of America. White signifies purity and innocence. Red (signifies) hardiness and valor and blue . . . signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice.”

Patriotism is not pride in the pain of our nation’s past. Rather, patriotism is pride in the principles that paved the way for change, whether that change was trading royalty for representation in 1776 or exchanging enslavement for emancipation in 1863.

From John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to Martin Luther King, Jr., many Americans have stood for justice for a more perfect union. “[When the architects of our republic](https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf) wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” King declared in his 1968 “I Have a Dream” speech. King tapped the principles created by our founders and applied them to make “[justice a reality](https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf) for all of God’s children.”

**5. We stand for the flag not for our generation but to set an example for the next generation.**

“[If we do not advocate a love of country to our children](http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/09/20/melania-trump-entire-united-nations-children-speech-sot.cnn) and the generations to come, then why would our children grow up to fight for their countries, the founding principles and moral truths?” Melania Trump asked in a recent speech to the United Nations. Passing along patriotism is crucial to the future survival of America. The color of white in the flag symbolizes [the purity and innocence](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:3:./temp/~ammem_w0qi::) of our children.

When we stand for the flag and anthem, we are standing for our hopes for our children’s future, that they will embrace the principles of patriotism and live out its moral truths of justice, perseverance and courage. We stand for the flag and anthem so they can stand for the flag and anthem.

Jane Hampton Cook is the author of “America’s Star-Spangled Story” and “The Burning of the White House: James and Dolley Madison and the War of 1812.” She is a former White House webmaster for President George W. Bush.