

# PRO/CON: Standing for the Pledge of Allegiance

By David Jungblut and Ricky House, PBS NewsHour, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.12.18

Word Count **1,020**

Level **1130L**



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 a high school teacher, I told my students, "Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance" all the time. I did not think the request itself would come under fire.

Long before the NFL protests, 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 to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed the freedoms of religion and speech.

I believed the students were justified in their actions in these cases of religious liberty, but 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,” I said and told them that many service members had died to protect their freedoms.

## **People Have Strong Feelings**

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. I personally did not serve. However, I am conscious of the critical role the military has played during my life.

I told my students they had a right to decide whether to stand or take a knee, but I wanted them to know, however, that people around them had strong feelings about the issue and made sacrifices for that right.

I also knew I needed to try to understand the students’ point of view. The students explained that the football players were kneeling because of Black Lives Matter and the deaths of several unarmed black men by law enforcement. They said they wanted to show their support for the movement and did not feel that they were being disrespectful to 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 by police brutality against people of color.

However, 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 is not something we can take lightly.

*David Jungblut taught ninth-grade science at Oakcrest High School in Hamilton Township, New Jersey, for 26 years before retiring. He continues to teach science at the community college level.*

## 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. They all 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?

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.”

The current administration has made white supremacists bold and has made marginalized communities feel afraid. 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.

Many would argue that not 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.

### **Moving The Focus Away From Racism**

Colin Kaepernick made it very clear his protest was about the way our institutions are built to marginalize and abuse African-Americans. By arguing that not standing for the anthem is being disrespectful to the flag, people are moving the focus away from systemic racism.

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are not saying that white lives do not matter. Instead, we are acknowledging that black people are disproportionately affected by police brutality and that we need to do something about it.

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 seem to ignore the fact that this nation was built on the foundation of slave labor, and that many institutions continue to fail people of color today.

I believe that this country has a lot of potential, but at this time it is not living up to that potential. Until America does better, I will not pledge allegiance to a country that is complicit with racism and police brutality.

*Ricky House is a seventh and eighth-grade social studies teacher in Arlington, Virginia. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Education.*