

TWILIGHT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM
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Due to a traffic delay, we didn't get to the ballpark in time to eat. I was starved but anyone who could not be seated at least 10 minutes before game time was kept in a huge holding pen outside the stadium and was not admitted until the 5th inning. While the National Anthem played everyone stood silently at attention, except a few giggling teenagers, who were quietly evicted and banished from the stadium.

As soon as I could I bought dinner. Biting into a Ballpark Frank, my tooth split right down to the nerve. I cannot describe the pain. So as we called our dentist and (after listening to a recording of the National Anthem) left a message for her to meet us at her office we raced out to the huge parking lot and eventually found our car. Bernice started the engine. But before it could be put in gear, the radio turned on to KUSA and played the National Anthem."

When we arrived at the dentist's office I raced into the dentist's chair in a jiffy. The dentist strolled in, gazed into my mouth and said, "That's a real deep split. I can see you were eating a Ballpark Frank."

I begged her to stop the pain. "First things first", she said as the National Anthem played before the drill would work, and, as an ex Marine saluted while I squeezed the blood out of the chair's arm rests.

After she numbed me and pulled what remained of my poor tooth she wrote out a prescription and handed it to me. "I'll see you tomorrow to finish this. Be sure to fill this soon because when the Novocain wears off it's going to hurt real bad."

Bernice drove me to the pharmacy, after the car played the National Anthem again. The pharmacist had to play the National Anthem before filling the prescription. By the time the pain killers were ready I was writhing on the floor.

Think this ridiculous story is absurd? Why then have we become complacent about the equally absurd yet now inviolable custom of playing the National Anthem before every sporting event? Why not before every battle? Why not before every class? Why not before every meal? Why not before going to the bathroom?

Playing the National Anthem before every sporting event did not become a religion overnight. Early spectators were rarely, if ever, subjected to it. The transition to an inviolable custom was protracted and largely casual, the principle always arbitrary.

In 1918 a band played the National Anthem during the seventh inning stretch of a World Series game at Fenway Park. It proved to be inspiring in the latter days of World War I. But bands were expensive so it didn't arise as a custom until PA systems arose. During World War II the National Anthem was played as a prelude to every public event and performance. In the years after World War II it gradually became a fixed mandate almost by default at the start of all sporting events. It stuck because it's never good to appear unpatriotic.

I knew nothing about Colin Kaepernick before he became a national news item in 2016 for his antics during the National Anthem. (I have since read that he is bright academically and prone to causes as well as a superb athlete). Once he hit the news I knew only, given his height and outlandish (and as I learned, recent) Afro that I would not want to sit behind him in a theatre, but I assumed and strongly suspected he was sublimating personal problems into a societal cause célèbre and that his football career would be shortened. The latter might actually be good for him considering the risk football players face of chronic traumatic encephalopathy. But no matter his cause, his idealism, his aggrandized following after Trump's tweets, and his ultimate impact (none of which are matters for this essay), and no matter if he is screwed up, the perfect starter solution for us all is to twilight the last glare of the extremely tiresome custom of playing the National Anthem before every sporting event.

Note Added 10 Oct 2020

In late May 2019 we attended the opening concert of the Brevard Summer Music Festival. On stage before the music began an official welcomed the audience and gave announcements about some upcoming events for the festival. As she concluded, a drum roll began. The orchestra followed with a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem. I found it touching, exquisite, and totally appropriate.