

THE BYSTANDER —★—

What Would You Stand For?

Published in the Martinsburg *Journal*, August 19, 2018

Do you stand up for a flag, a song, or a pledge? What else might you stand up for because it is worthy of respect and protection? Let's face it; no one cares if an average person refuses to stand for the *National Anthem*. So far, it's only been significant if a famous athlete does it, on camera, in front of tens of thousands of people.

Last month, at the annual Antietam Battlefield "Fourth of July Salute to Independence Concert" in Sharpsburg, Maryland, one of the speakers for the event rose to address the crowd of 30,000. The *Star-Spangled Banner* had already been performed, but he intentionally mentioned it by saying, with emphasis, "I **stand** for the *National Anthem*." And with that comment, for us average folks, it was like throwing down the gauntlet of yore; will you stand up, or will you stand down?

But in the debate over how to show respect for the *symbols* of America, I don't understand how this act of peaceful protest, which hurts no one, could be the topic of national attention.

Meanwhile, there is something in Mississippi that needs to be guarded by Americans who are willing to simply stand up in front of it, to protect it and provide it the full measure of respect it deserves. It's not a flag, and it's not a song; it's a simple metal sign, with white letters on a purple background. The site that it commemorates is just a river bank where a body was once found, but it has a significance that can't be overstated. The sign has been replaced many times since 2007 after being torn down, shot with more than 100 rounds of ammunition, painted over, and smeared with KKK graffiti.

This sign marks the spot where a 14-year old Black teenager was found after being kidnapped, tortured and murdered in 1955. He became the guilty party in an imaginary crime that was exaggerated beyond the realm of evil fantasy. His death still haunts children in this country, both black and white, who can't fathom how anyone could hate so much, that a child should

THE BYSTANDER —★—

suffer, so much. And there was no justice for him then or now. The latest marker for him, put up in June of 2018, lasted 35 days before it was found to be punctured with bullet holes.

In the debate over how to show respect for the *people* of America, I don't understand how this act of hateful violence, which hurts us all, could *not* be the topic of national attention.

Rather than ordering people to stand for the *National Anthem*, I suggest we send a force of volunteers to simply stand in front of this sign, to protect it from the next shotgun bullet like the one that blasted through the word "mother" in the third line. We'll need a full rotation of perimeter guards for this plaque, because it cannot survive unless we stand watch to keep it from being disrespected, left in tatters, spat at or burned.

Showing patriotism by getting up off one's haunches into an upright position while the *Star-Spangled Banner* is played is easy, and barely requires leaving our comfort zone, mentally or physically. But literally or figuratively standing up in front of this memorial plaque for Emmett Till, knowing how it has been a magnet for hatred and will likely *again* be a target for attack, would take real courage---the kind that many Americans have shown wearing the uniform of our country, or of a sports team, or in street clothes.

Doing that would be our Perilous Fight, for the Home of the Brave and the Land of the Free. It's not *our song* until we sing it for everybody.