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‘An ode to slavery’: New Minnesota mayor revives conversation on national anthem and race

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A newly sworn-in mayor in one of the heartland’s largest metro areas revived a criticism of the national anthem that was often overlooked during the NFL protests.

At his swearing in, Melvin Carter III, the first black mayor of St. Paul, Minn., argued that a part of America’s most patriotic song is inherently racist.

“We cannot ignore the painful reminder, written into our anthem’s third verse, of just how deeply injustice is rooted in the American tradition. ... Our national freedom song is an ode to slavery,” Carter said in his speech, the Twin Cities Pioneer Press [reported](#).

“This is the American paradox, passed from generation to generation, dating back to the noble group of rich, white, straight, male landowners who embedded into our founding principles a yearning for a set of God-given rights they sought to secure for only themselves,” he continued.

Carter is referring to the anthem’s little sung third verse, which includes the lyrics:

*No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave*

There is a debate about what the word “slave” specifically refers to, but some say it explains black Americans’ long-held discomfort with the anthem, which has been the center of controversial NFL player protests.

Jason Johnson, political editor of the Root, an online news magazine addressing issues related to black Americans, [disparaged](#) the song in 2016:

“It is one of the most racist, proslavery, anti-black songs in the American lexicon, and you would be wise to cut it from your Fourth of July playlist.”

He explained the slaves referenced in the song were the Colonial Marines, a group of runaway slaves who fought against the Americans in the British Royal Army with the hope of gaining emancipation. That group of black soldiers defeated the troops of “Star Spangled Banner” writer

Francis Scott Key, a lieutenant, during the Battle of Bladensburg. Johnson, a political-science professor, wrote that Key was mindful of this when he wrote the now popular song:

“With Key still bitter that some black soldiers got the best of him a few weeks earlier, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ is as much a patriotic song as it is a diss track to black people who had the audacity to fight for their freedom. Perhaps that’s why it took almost 100 years for the song to become the national anthem.”

But Walter Olson wrote in the National Review, a conservative magazine, that it is not clear Key’s use of the word “slave” in his lyrics is referring to black people enslaved in America. Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said at the time, the word “slave” was “a wide-ranging epithet, hurled at persons of any and all colors, nationalities, and conditions of servitude or otherwise.” He wrote:

Was Key pursuing a grudge by describing, or misdescribing, the Corps of Colonial Marines as slaves? Or did he have the (predominantly white) conscripts in mind? Or was he just reaching for a common word pairing, familiar to his listeners, that provided him with a rhyme?

There’s no record of him ever explaining why he chose those words. When we decide whether to give his words a reading that is charitable or otherwise, we make a choice too.

With the Super Bowl less than a month away, NFL protests are likely to make headlines again, especially if the Minnesota Vikings, the NFL team in Carter’s home state, continue their winning season.

Even Bud Grant, who previously coached the Vikings, weighed in on the protests telling the Pioneer Press:

“They’ve got every right to do it. This is a free country. This country was founded on freedom of expression, but all those people that came from Sweden or Ireland or Spain or France and settled this country, all stood under that flag for many, many, many years.

“And now to have somebody, whether it’s a disrespect for the flag or the national anthem or whatever cause they have in their craw, I don’t (know), if you took a poll, how many people would favor that.”

There are significant differences between how black and white Americans viewed the protests, according to polls on the issue. Regardless of where one stands, nearly seven in 10 — 68 percent — of registered voters said President Trump’s call for the NFL players to be fired was inappropriate, according to a USA Today/Suffolk University poll.

The president hasn’t opined on the protests in quite some time, but with this year’s Super Bowl being played in Minnesota, there’s a good chance both Trump and Carter may return the issue to national headlines.