

An Open Letter to Megan Rapinoe, from America

As told to Joel Engel.



(Maja Hitij/Getty Images)

First, let us congratulate you and your teammates on a sensational World Cup championship. You made us proud.

You know us, right? The country you've represented so ably on the pitch? Because—hope this doesn't sound weird—we've kind of had some small role in your success. No question, you worked for what you've accomplished with the talents you were fortunate to be blessed

with. But never forget you that had the opportunity to do so. That you've made the most of those opportunities delights us; it's what we're all about. But we do wonder why you'd discount the privilege you enjoyed of having had those opportunities that are, sad to say, deprived to most people around the world.

Correct us if we're wrong. But our understanding is that most or all of you and your teammates came from middle-class homes (or better) and were allowed and encouraged to take up organized sports at early ages. All (or most) of you went to college and I'd be surprised if any of you paid full-tuition.

This is . . . not the norm around the world. It should be! But this is a form of privilege that's been granted to you by dint of your birth and we kind of thought that you'd (1) be grateful for it, and (2) would recognize it for what it is and be humble about how many of the women you competed against in France did not have the same advantages.

Because let's be honest: If you're a female soccer player, being born in America is like winning the lottery. The U.S. women's teams have now won four World Cup titles, four Olympic gold medals, and eight CONCACAF gold cups—that's the kind of domination that no national team in any country in any sport, male or female, has ever achieved. Something must be going right with America and our support of women's athletics. USA! USA!

So we were kind of confused the other day when you explained your refusal to sing the National Anthem. We're not quite sure what upsets you. "I think for detractors," you said, "I would have them look hard

into what I'm saying and the actions that I'm doing. Maybe you don't agree with every single way that I do it, and that can be discussed."

Well, back atcha. Aren't we entitled to the same benefit of the doubt?

Let's discuss whether there's a country that has made *more* progress on virtually every human rights front in little more than a generation? In fact, let's discuss how some countries are actually going backwards. Surely you've noticed that [France](#) and [Germany](#) and the [UK](#) and much of the rest of the world are trying to criminalize the kind of speech rights you're now famous for exercising.

"I know that I'm not perfect," [you said](#), "but I think that I stand for honesty and for truth and for wanting to have the conversation and for looking at the country honestly. I think this country was founded on a lot of great ideals, but it was also founded on slavery. And I think we just need to be really honest about that and be really open in talking about that so we can reconcile that and hopefully move forward and make this country better for everyone."

What we hear you saying is, we should look past your imperfections and focus on your intentions. Okay, well, again, back atcha. Right there in the preamble to our Constitution it says, "in order to form a *more perfect union*..."

You see? "More perfect" expressly states that we're a work in progress. And aren't we all! And we have this Constitution—the oldest in the world—that allows for every generation to amend what was originally set down and try to make "this country better for everyone."

There've been 17 Amendments added to the original 10. True, not all of

them have made things better. The 16th, 17th, and 18th were giant mistakes that backfired spectacularly (though fortunately the 18th was repealed). But all were passed with the intention of making things better: for example, the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and limiting presidents to two terms.

So if we're going to "be really honest" about slavery and "hopefully move forward," you might acknowledge that chattel slavery ended more than 150 years ago. It was a legacy of our colonial master, England, which at the time practiced slavery in every one of its colonies and territories, and had for over a century, before the American Revolution was a glint in the Founding Fathers' eyes.

Read the accounts of the Constitutional Convention to see how fiercely slavery was debated. Yes, it would've been wonderful if the antislavery voices had prevailed. But keep in mind that if slavery had been disallowed from the beginning, about half of the original 13 colonies wouldn't have joined the "united" states. Then what? Then no United States. The fact that it was a primary topic of discussion and argumentation at a time when slavery existed on every populated continent and had since the beginning of time was a moral victory without precedent in history.

Here's the progressive historian Sean Wilentz, [from his book](#) *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding*:

[A]lthough the framers agreed to compromises over slavery that blunted antislavery hopes and augmented the slaveholders' power, they also deliberately excluded any validation of property in man.

This exclusion, insisted upon by a majority of the delegates, was of

profound and fateful importance. It rendered slavery solely a creation of state laws. It thereby opened the prospect of a United States free of slavery—a prospect some delegates deeply desired and many more believed was coming to pass. Above all, it left room for the new federal government to hinder slavery's expansion, something which, after the Constitution's ratification, slavery's opponents struggled to achieve.

Kind of amazing, no? Imagine the guts it took for the Founders to force this exclusion at a moment when it threatened to derail the entire creation of the country. Again: USA! USA!

About twenty years later, the importation of slaves was prohibited, and a few decades later, 2 percent of the country's population (4 percent of men) died fighting a civil war to end slavery. No other country did that. Have there been racial issues and prejudice since then?

Absolutely. There's not a mixed-racial society on Earth that doesn't suffer issues like that, and ours are compounded by the lingering hangover from both slavery and Jim Crow. But has there been astounding progress, in law and hearts and minds? The answer is an unqualified yes. You can want to improve things more without misunderstanding the amazing scope of progress we've already made together.

Frankly, we don't really care if you sing the National Anthem or stand there like Han Solo in carbonite. Either one is your right. This isn't North Korea, where citizens fear they'll be tortured or killed if they stop applauding Fearless Leader. This is in itself another point in our favor. But whatever.

But we do have a question:

Did you notice how loudly and enthusiastically the French [players and spectators](#) in that jammed stadium sang their national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, before your quarterfinal match against France? These people adore their anthem. No matter where or when it's played, they stand up straighter, sing at the top of their lungs, and frequently hold back tears—like that scene in *Casablanca*. Sometimes the French just burst into singing the anthem while [waiting for a train](#). And French coaches don't seem to have much problem getting a plane of French citizens to [sing along](#).

Now for the record: We love France. We do. Without France, we might very well not be here. And, without us, neither would France. But it must be said that France is . . . not perfect, either. They have had [historical problems](#) with how they treat immigrants. And [racism](#). There's [rising anti-Semitism](#). And France hasn't exactly achieved *égalité* in [women's rights](#), either.

Compared with that, America looks pretty good, no? If you'd been French, would you have sung their national anthem? We sure hope not.

If you don't speak French, you might hear the tune and think *La Marseillaise* is the best drinking song on the planet. But it's actually the most martial of all the national anthems, and has been since it was written during a period in the bloody French Revolution when France was flinging itself into wars against other European powers—in this case, before France attacked Austria.

Take a listen:

Let's go children of the fatherland,
The day of glory has arrived!
Against us tyranny's
Bloody flag is raised
In the countryside, do you hear
The roaring of these fierce soldiers?
They come right to our arms
To slit the throats of our sons, our friends!

To arms, citizens!
Form your battalions!
Let's march! Let's march!
May impure blood
Water our fields!

Makes the "Star Spangled Banner" look pretty admirable, actually.

As you saw, several members of the French team you played against were young women of color. Their families had come from former French colonies in Africa like Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, and Cameroon. Repeat: former *colonies*. Meaning countries that France, competing with other European powers, fought over and occupied for centuries in order to steal their natural resources and enslave their people. We never did that.

It wasn't all that long ago, probably during your parents' lives, that the last of those African colonies were granted their freedom from France. Only [after a war](#). And *beaucoup de problèmes* remain. In fact, many of these young women grew up in what the French call "les banlieus,"

essentially suburban slums inhabited mostly by immigrants with little hope of being accepted as fully French and only slightly more hope of a better future—unless, of course, they played soccer and showed French *football* officials [they could be useful](#). Yet they sang as loudly and passionately as everyone else; same with the young men on the [French U-20 team](#), many of whom have colonial heritage.

By contrast, our national anthem was inspired by seeing a flag still flying over a fort that had been attacked by the British in 1814, soon after they'd invaded Washington and burned the White House, the Capitol, and other buildings and before attacking Fort McHenry in Baltimore. The siege lasted a full day and night, but in the morning the American soldiers who'd withstood the barrage raised a large flag—as Francis Scott Key saw with his own eyes from a boat in Baltimore Harbor. Not for nothing was the War of 1812 nicknamed “The Second American Revolution.” (By the way, the lyrics Key wrote were paired with a tune that really was a popular drinking song.)

You're probably too young to remember a term that used to be thrown about wherever Americans traveled after World War II: “The Ugly American.” It was a pejorative that referred to, as [Wikipedia](#) puts it, “loud, [arrogant](#), demeaning, thoughtless, ignorant, and ethnocentric behavior of American citizens.” Given that “USA” is on your jersey, we were embarrassed to hear that sentiment directed at you and the team, beginning with your 13-0 slaughter of Thailand in the first Cup game, when Team USA celebrated each goal as if it were the Cup clincher, and crescendoed when Alex Morgan mimed drinking a cup of tea after scoring against England.

“Wah-wah-wah,” [you said](#) sarcastically, insisting that men aren’t criticized for similar displays of grandiosity and unsportsmanship.

As it happens, you’re right about that. Which explains why our national pastime is baseball, not football or basketball (or, for that matter, soccer). In baseball, guys make plays that defy the laws of physics, but baseball’s culture is nonchalance, so players [pretend it was no big deal](#); that it’s what they’re being paid for; that they’ve done it before and will do it again.

Sure, back in the dugout, their teammates will go a little crazy and maybe push them onto the field for a reluctant, and quick, curtain call if the fans demand it. But they don’t perform for the crowd because the unwritten rule is: Never show up the other team. Those who do can expect a little chin music next time they come to the plate.

In football, it seems like every [sack](#), or tackle, or first down, or reception produces a celebration or an arms-wide “I did it” for the crowd. Same with dunks and three-pointers in basketball. Kind of like what you did after scoring the first goal in the championship game and running to the corner of the pitch.

But isn’t this . . . not good? Isn’t it the kind of behavior we should be trying to discourage in athletes? Because when you respect the other team, you respect the game.

The idea of athletics is to try to live up to our highest ideals. Not revel in living down to the debased standards of others.

Besides—not to put too fine a point on it—but it’s a really bad look given your enormous privilege. Thailand’s per capita GDP is 1/9 of

America's. They went through a military coup in 2014. When you go crazy after scoring the 8th goal against those women you maybe look like Cobra Kai. [Nobody roots for Cobra Kai.](#)

All right, Megan, we'll let you go enjoy the fruits of your victory. You've earned your place in the Pantheon, and we hope you'll use it constructively. As someone who's been so blessed and so privileged, please encourage other young women to take advantage of their opportunities in this country that are unparalleled anywhere else in the world, and urge them to work hard for what they want, just as you did.

And as a P.S., I'd also ask you to indulge me by listening to [Whitney Houston's version](#) of the National Anthem. It's a game changer.

Love always,

The United States of America

