

THE BANES OF OLD GLORY

By Dennis Knight

*The Stars and Stripes fly as the standard of liberty and justice for all.
You are a fool who sets torch to the flag in the exercise of freedom,
For as long as we are free, it is impervious to mere flame.
You are the greater fool who would make a law to shield the banner from the exercise of freedom,
For you will make the flag burner freedom's champion.*

I wrote this verse in 1993, more than two decades ago, after hearing of another in a long series of attempts to bar the desecration of the flag of the United States. It would have taken a constitutional amendment, and it has always failed, because amending our constitution is a difficult process.

I hope my words then made my point, that burning our flag as a protest in the exercise of freedom may be insulting to you and to me as patriotic Americans, but it has nothing more than shock value. And yet, that same symbolic act if done in a society that denies the right to do so elevates the flag burner to the status of hero in the defense of freedom.

The irony of this all is that the freedom of speech that permits one to burn a flag also allows the guy down the block to desecrate our flag by exploiting its attraction and in doing so (more irony) to mock legally instituted community sign codes.

In our neighborhood, a dealership selling imported cars (even more irony) flies an American flag so large that it seems wide enough at full flap and halyard to cover a boulevard. And around the nation, a large restaurant chain, in the name of patriotism, draws attention to its stores from miles away with American flags thirty feet wide by twenty feet high, dwarfing their seventy-foot flagpoles. In neither of my examples do the hucksters conform to proper protocols and etiquette in using Old Glory.

Title 36, Chapter 10 of the United States Code serves as our guide. It delineates when and how the flag should be displayed. Article 176 of the code, titled "Respect for flag," sets forth things we should never do to it, including letting it touch the floor or ground. We should never use it as wearing apparel, bedding or drapery. Among some other don'ts in that article, the one that really makes my point says "The flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever."

If you shred or destroy our flag in a symbolic protest, you may bring momentary attention to your cause, but your act is made trivial by the very freedom you are exercising, and I am happy to ignore you. As for you who disrespect our flag commercially to flip pancakes and sell cars, you too are protected by the constitution which Old Glory represents, but you are trivial, and I, and my checkbook, will be happy to ignore you as well.