

The Lost Legacy of Our Veterans

At Arlington Cemetery each year at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, we honor America's nobility — our veterans. We are again inspired by their sacrifice and we look around us in wonder at their gifts. Perhaps this Veterans Day we might ask why they gave so much of body and soul for us.

A patriot is one who loves, supports and serves his country. Our veterans are true patriots. They have taken their love to the highest level — to sacrifice. Their love is the very foundation for the security and prosperity of this country. But are we still a lovable people worthy of sacrifice? Many gave their lives for the country they served, how many would give their lives again for the country we are becoming?

Patriotism is not frenzied, flag-waving sentiment. It is based on individual morality and a willingness to sacrifice, and so is democracy. It is serious business, our survival depends on it. Tragically, most polls tell us patriotism is declining. We see its decline in sexual license, crimes against our neighbors, our land, in our failure to vote, our reluctance to serve and in the level of disrespect we have for our elected officials.

And we see the decline of patriotism in the legalized desecration of the symbol of patriotism, Old Glory. Supreme Court Justice John Harlan spoke about the connection between patriotism and flag desecration when he said, "Love both of the common country and the state will diminish in proportion as respect for the flag is weakened."

Too few Americans realize that the Supreme Court in 1989, by one vote, took away from the people the right to protect their flag, a right we had cherished since our birth. A constitutional amendment which would return to the people the right to protect their flag passed overwhelmingly in the U.S. House of Representatives in June and will soon be introduced in the U.S. Senate.

It is important to know that the flag amendment does not, of itself, change the Constitution, it restores the Constitution to the way it treated the flag for over 200 years. It takes control of the flag away from the courts (who have ruled that defecation on the flag is "speech") and returns it to the people who can protect it if they choose.

But stand by for a tirade from the ACLU and their allies in the media on the horrors to "speech" and the Constitution that will result if the flag amendment passes in the Senate. Forget the fact that for 200 years we had the right to protect the flag and speech flourished, as did a value system nourished by the blood of our veterans, and there were none of these horrors. Neither the ACLU nor the media gave us the freedom of speech — our veterans did.

Flag burning is not speech, it is conduct and has nothing to do with the First Amendment. Who says? Eighty percent of the American people and seventy percent of Congress for starters. And members of five Supreme Courts in this century have defended the right of the people to protect their flag. And what better authority than the men who framed the First Amendment and adopted

the first flag, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. These great Americans denounced flag burning as an assault on our sovereignty, a crime, and not in any way a suppression of speech.

Old Glory's greatest worth is found in the fact that respect for the flag has inspired, throughout our history, the values that our veterans fought for. These are values that make us the most respected nation on earth, and values vital to our children and our future.

The highest form of patriotism is service to our youth. The flag is the greatest training aid we have to teach our children patriotism, respect and citizenship. Pearl Buck, in describing the treasures that are our children, tells how the flag is such a precious symbol to children and so important to their development. The greatest tragedy in flag mutilation is the disrespect for the values it embodies, and disrespect to those who have sacrificed for those values. Disrespect is the genesis of hate, it provokes the dissolution of our unity, a unity which has only one symbol — the flag.

Disrespect, division and disunity are not characteristic of a lovable people and will not inspire patriotism.

There are great and gifted Americans on both sides of this issue. And learned opinions, but only one fact — the American people want their flag protection rights returned. Whatever concerns some may have, I pray they will muster the courage to believe that this once they may be wrong, and the American public may be right. I hope they will have the compassion to defer to those great blood donors to our freedom, those men and women we honor on Veterans Day, many whose final earthly embrace was in the folds of Old Glory.