

## A Secular Sacredness Saluting the Flag's Special Symbolic Status

By Adrian Cronauer  
Board of Directors, Citizens Flag Allian

Thirty years ago, as a young Air Force disc jockey, I entertained our troops in Vietnam. My signature wake-up call, "**Good Morning, Vietnam!**" eventually became the title of the hit movie based ever so loosely on my radio career in Saigon.

There was plenty of Hollywood exaggeration in the movie. For example, I must admit Robin Williams, who played me in the film, is much funnier than I am. I also believe I was a better disc jockey. But there was an important element of truth to the film when it showed how frequently I annoyed the Saigon brass by fighting against military censorship. Those scenes demonstrate how we can inform, entertain and even inspire each other if we push the limits of the First Amendment.

The First Amendment is -- and always has been -- very important to me. You could say most of my life has been spent defending the First Amendment. Having enjoyed a career in broadcast journalism after Vietnam, I have always been a self-styled defender of free speech, and I would never support anything that infringed on our American right to say or write whatever we want.

You can't just fool around with the Constitution. As Rep. Gerald Solomon (R-NY) has pointed out, since the 51st Congress in 1889, 9,100 amendments have been proposed, but only 14 have been sent to the states for ratification and only 11 were ratified and added to the Constitution.

Having said that, I want to declare my support for the proposed constitutional amendment to protect the American Flag from physical desecration -- an amendment already overwhelmingly approved by the House (310-114) in June '97, and scheduled for consideration by the Senate in January. I support the flag amendment because I am very confident it provides protection for our flag, without setting a dangerous precedent that waters down the First Amendment.

I reached this position only after a long professional and intellectual journey. The journey leading to my support of the flag amendment began after "**Good Morning, Vietnam!**" was released nine years ago. Veterans groups, business organizations, colleges and universities all across the United States were kind enough to invite me to speak to their members. During those meetings, which continue to this day, I have heard people, some of whom have risked their lives in defense of the American Flag, speak passionately and eloquently about the need to protect this precious national symbol from any type of physical desecration.

Numerous hours spent listening to conversations such as these have caused me to realize how strongly individuals, both veterans and non-vets, identify with the flag. I now believe the flag is qualitatively different than any other symbol we have in this country. It represents things that are uncommonly powerful, both intellectually and emotionally -- love of country, the country itself, patriotism, and the sacrifices that have been made of behalf of our nation for generations.

I have come to the conclusion that the flag has a "**secular sacredness**" which entitles it to a special form of constitutional protection. This protection, I believe, can be achieved without setting a dangerous precedent of undermining the First Amendment. In fact, because it actually amends the Constitution, the proposed flag amendment shields the flag while leaving our right to free speech undisturbed.

The founding fathers developed an amazing and brilliant document when they wrote our Constitution. In their wisdom, they realized they had no way to anticipate the specific circumstances we encounter today. To address this, they deliberately created the Constitution to set forth the basic principles that guide our nation and to apply to as many situations as possible. When it comes to specific cases, it is up to the Supreme Court to decide how any part of the Constitution applies.

The founding fathers also wanted the Constitution to be able to meet changing circumstances and confront issues unimaginable back in the late 18th Century. Although the basic principles of freedom of the press and freedom of speech remain valid, they had much different meanings in the printing press days of Benjamin Franklin than we have in the digital world we live in today.

In a government of fallible human beings that exists in an ever-changing world, situations are bound to arise in which the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Constitution does not coincide with the needs and desires of the people. Realizing governments ultimately derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, the founding fathers produced the Constitution to be flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances.

The amendment process was deliberately made arduous and cumbersome enough to ensure only issues that are extremely vital and important to a vast number of Americans would merit consideration when it comes to altering our nation's governing charter. This amendment meets that standard of importance to the people.

Gallup polls consistently show 83 percent of Americans want the amendment; several statewide polls show similar results. In addition, legislatures in 49 states have passed resolutions urging Congress to pass the flag protection amendment.

By joining the House in passing the amendment, the Senate can protect an honored symbol while preserving our First Amendment rights. It can also send a very important message to the young people of this country -- that the ideals of this country, such as patriotism, sacrifice and love of country, are basic to what our nation stands for and are ideals worth honoring and protecting.

*Adrian Cronauer is a communications lawyer in Washington, D.C. He is the vice chairman of the Vietnam Veteran's Institute and a board member of the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition and the Citizen's Flag Alliance. Distributed by Knight-Ridder/Tribune Information Services.*

SOURCE: CHICAGO TRIBUNE

DATE: 12/28/97

EDITION: CHICAGOLAND FINAL; C; SECTION: COMMENTARY ; PAGE: 21

(Copyright 1997)