

The American Flag Matters

By John Carroll
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Hats off to the Vermont Senate for its action last week passing the resolution against desecration of the American flag. This is the second year in a row that the Senate has struggled with this painful and complicated issue. This year, the Senate got it right.

Until recently, I served in the Vermont Senate, and when the Senate debated the flag resolution last year, I was among the majority who opposed the resolution. I was wrong.

I was wrong because I thought that this issue, like so many others in the Statehouse, was a problem to be solved through study and analysis. It's not. It's a matter of the heart.

I didn't grasp this until a quiet afternoon in Belvedere last August during my campaign for the United States Congress. After marching in a small community parade, I stayed around for the dedication of a memorial honoring veterans of military service. As individual veterans (and their children) stood to be recognized for their service and sacrifice, I fought back tears. My heart literally ached.

Maybe it was the isolation and the exhaustion of a statewide candidacy that broke my defenses, that allowed feelings to get past my head and into my heart. Whatever it was, I couldn't stop thinking about my father, himself a veteran of military service, long since passed away.

My father had fought at Verdun in 1918. There, amid terrible carnage - and great courage - he was shot and gassed. But he survived.

Dad never talked much about fighting in France. He never made a big thing out of patriotism or the flag - we didn't even have a flagpole at home. But I noticed as a kid that he always held his hat (he always wore a hat) over his heart when the flag passed by at the parade. And, I knew by his silence, that fighting under his country's flag on those killing fields in France had changed his life forever.

Thirty years ago, when Dad died, the American flag draped his coffin. The flag had been placed there by men of the local American Legion. These were men that he and us had not known especially well. But in the end, they were his brothers-in-arms. At his graveside, these men that we hardly knew resolutely folded Dad's flag and, without a word, they handed the flag gently to my mother.

Back at the family place after the service, all the friends and family had headed home - except me, the last to leave. In the fading light of sunset, Mum and I sat alone, together in silence, exhausted, out of words. Dad's flag tightly folded in a tri-cornered bundle, rested on the table by his empty chair. I reached out for it. The flag was firm and soft, like a swaddled newborn. I held it in my arms until the house was dark.

Leaving my mother alone with her grief in that empty house, I hated to say goodbye. Halfway to Boston, I turned the car around, found a lumberyard open late, bought a 12-foot pole and some hardware, and headed north back to my parent's home.

Arriving there, I pulled the car onto the sloping lawn so that its headlights shone on the front of the clapboard cape. Without explanation, I got the ladder and my tools and built a flagpole out over the front door. By midnight, it was finished, painted white, ready.

Early the next morning, I unfurled Dad's flag, hung it on the new flagpole, and said goodbye to Mum. Turning to wave as I drove away, I saw Dad's flag flutter gently in the morning light. I knew right then that this flag and pole were my statement to the world of my dad's sacrifice, his gift to all of us. I was in tears, but I felt a lot better.

A year ago when I voted in the Senate, I thought of my father's flag, but I had lost touch with what it meant in my heart. But not until that quiet August afternoon in Belvedere, among veterans of other wars, did I fully understand that the flag issue is - and should be - about what we feel, not about what we think.

I've listened closely to all the rational arguments about freedom of speech, symbols versus reality, and what Madison really meant in the Federalist Papers. In fact, I've even made some of these arguments myself! All very interesting, but they miss the point.

The point is, this is the American flag, and it's the only flag we've got. This flag stands for everything that is good about this country. Trampling and burning the flag is not a political protest: it is, in fact, a frontal assault upon the values and feelings of the women and men who helped to build and protect what's best about this country. The American flag deserves special recognition and protection, even if five people on the Supreme Court don't think so.

Vermont's Senate did the right thing, last week, by passing a resolution to protect the flag. By contrast, Vermont's House of Representatives has rejected the resolution. Now it's time for the House to listen to its heart and to join the Senate in saying that values matter. Respect matters. The flag matters.

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