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The Flag-- Only "a Symbol?"

RECENTLY I was honored to speak at Flag Day ceremonies at the Harry S Truman Library in the home town of that great former President during whose tenure Flag Day officially came into being.

The happy coincidence of the occasion, and the place—Independence—together with its proximity to Independence Day, makes it abundantly appropriate to express on this page some thoughts about our Flag.

Nearly two centuries ago a group of brave and determined men cast aside their fears and proclaimed this to be a free and independent nation. They took as their basic premise a proposition that still excites the peoples of nations less favored than ours: the proposition that men have an inherent right to determine their own destinies, and to govern themselves.

Soon, those earliest American patriots were involved in a desperate struggle for freedom, but they took pains to create and formally adopt a flag for their new country. Thus, on June 14, 1777, the Stars and Stripes was born of the same struggle and turmoil that gave birth to the nation itself.

As the years passed, America expanded and grew strong, and its flag came to stand for such glorious concepts as freedom, and human dignity, and the right of men everywhere to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Old Glory became the symbol of a people who were concerned with the welfare of all men. It became, as someone once described it, "the dominant, endless thread woven throughout the tapestry of American national life."

Daring, adventurous Americans carried it westward, to open new lands to settlement; across the seas, and into the unexplored regions of the Arctic and Antarctic—even on the Lunar surface, not as a symbol of conquest but of what Neil Armstrong called "a giant leap for mankind."

Today, flag-waving unfortunately has become a term of opprobrium, not of commendation. Some of our radicals and self-styled "revolutionaries" see nothing wrong with burning the flag, or spitting on it, to demonstrate their opposition to our Nation and its policies. They say, when challenged: "Why get so uptight about a piece of cloth? It's nothing more than a symbol!"

Perhaps so—but it is this very symbolism that causes us to resent the desecration of a flag under which our Nation has travelled so far and achieved so much.

Such acts demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of what America is really all about. They also demonstrate a lack of maturity among many younger Americans that is frightening.

I am discouraged sometimes by our inability to convey a sense of history and of national purpose to our young. I am appalled by the violent and destructive modes of protest that many have adopted. I am shocked by those who condone and excuse lawlessness as a permissible means to make their opinions heard. I find little to admire, and much to deplore, in what is euphemistically described as "dissent" by many college students and faculty members but which so often has been just plain criminal behavior.

But, recently, there is reason to be encouraged. The recent new outbreak of anti-war disorders shocked so many Americans that they are saying: "Dissent, yes—violence and lawlessness, no!" On college campuses, thoughtful, moderate voices are commencing to condemn extremism and violence. Hopefully, this may be the turning point—or at least the beginning of a turning point.

Whether it becomes a turning point, or merely a springboard for new violence, will depend on all Americans. We must again articulate the ideals which made us great—ideals that are embodied in the flag we love. And we must somehow communicate those ideals to our sons and daughters. "One nation indivisible, under God, with freedom and justice for all"—government by law—loyalty—honor—human rights, including the right to disagree and dissent peacefully. ♦



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