

NEWS

SENATE WAR HERO CRITICIZES PRESIDENT FOR FLAG STANCE

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President Bush marked Flag Day with a dawn visit Thursday to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial while a Medal of Honor-winning senator said he was ashamed of Bush's recent actions concerning a constitutional amendment on flag burning.

"Today, in quiet glory, the Stars and Stripes continue to proclaim the shining promise of America," Bush said in a statement released after he visited the memorial. He proclaimed not only Flag Day but Flag Week.

Later, veterans in American Legion and Amvets caps, along with camera-carrying tourists, swarmed over Capitol Hill where rows of American flags hung limp in the heat while lawmakers poured forth Flag Day oratory.

On Main Streets across the nation, Americans decked front porches with American flags in honor of the day.

Bush called on "all Americans to observe Flag Day and Flag Week by flying the Stars and Stripes from their homes and other suitable places."

He said nothing about the proposed constitutional amendment, which passed its first hurdle Wednesday in the House, two days after the Supreme Court threw out last year's flag protection law.

To become part of the Constitution, the amendment will need two-thirds support in both the House and the Senate and ratification by 38 state legislatures.

"On this joyous occasion, may we also renew our determination to uphold the ideals enshrined in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence," the president said in his statement.

Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., who won the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, called the push for a flag amendment "an attempt to divide America, to divide fathers against sons." He said it would reopen "the generation gap" of the Vietnam era.

Kerrey held up a picture of Bush laughing at a White House meeting as Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., held a flag - a picture, the senator said, that showed the real point of the debate was to gain "political advantage."

"I am ashamed of what he did," Kerrey declared in an impassioned speech on the Senate floor.

"He has chosen to divide his country on an issue that, frankly, in my opinion, should not be given this much attention," Kerrey later told a rally of congressional veterans against the amendment.

Sen. John C. Danforth, R-Mo., parting company with conservative colleagues, took the Senate floor to oppose the amendment.

"We, thank God, do not live in a brittle, fragile country, because in our country anybody is free to express himself," Danforth said.

The debate over the flag resounded in incidents across America.

Townpeople of Northfield, Minn., awoke to find 3,000 small plastic flags planted in their lawns by employees of a real estate company "as an important part of our heritage." But one local critic grumbled that it was "an intrusive political statement."

Dole, the Senate Republican leader, won a commitment from Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, to hold a Senate vote on the flag amendment before Congress' Fourth of July recess.

In the House, Speaker Thomas S. Foley, D-Wash., has said a vote could come as early as next week and certainly before the holiday break.

The issue was rekindled Monday when the Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision threw out as unconstitutional a federal law approved last year that would have banned burning and other desecration of the American flag.

Dole scoffed at the notion that flag burning represents free speech and thus should not be outlawed. "It's malicious, stupid, irresponsible conduct, not speech," Dole said.

On the other hand, Sen. Terry Sanford, D-N.C., scorned statements that a flag-burning ban would put only a small limit on free speech.

"That's like saying I'm going to take a little tiny sliver out of your heart," Sanford said.