

PERSPECTIVE

This flag talk burns me up Series: Commentary

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At long last, Congress is taking action.

Not on entrenched poverty or fiscal myopia. Not on child abuse, teen pregnancy, or adult irresponsibility. Not on bad schools, worse students, and even worse parents. Not on the causes of crime. Not on the perils to our future.

Such matters must wait. The concern that has galvanized the august bodies, the concern so urgent that the House of Representatives on June 28 voted 312-120 in favor of altering the Constitution, is flag-burning. The six or eight burnings per year - roughly one for each natural disaster - clearly sap the national morale. The United States has 20,000 murders every year, far more of them committed with guns than with flags, yet our elected officials occupy themselves with 50 stars and 13 stripes.

Amid the political expediency, weighty philosophical issues are overlooked. To wit:

If little American flags adorn the motorcade of a visiting dictator, does that not desecrate the American flag generally?

If a flag flies in front of a crooked business, does that not desecrate it?

If a politician wraps himself in it (only male politicians seem prone to this), does that not leave the flag besmirched with grease and slime, thereby desecrating it?

If we desecrate the Constitution by putting provisos on basic freedoms, are we not also desecrating the flag?

True, the amendment refers to "physical desecration," but that raises its own questions. What constitutes physical desecration? What constitutes a flag? Is it physical desecration of the flag to let dust cover the stars-and-stripes sticker on one's construction helmet? Is it physical desecration to sew the flag to one's jeans and spend the day sitting on it? Is it physical desecration to lick a flag stamp? Imagine, French-kissing Old Glory! Well, they did help win the Revolution.

A St. Petersburg real estate company led me to ponder these questions this Fourth of July, planting 12-by-18-inch flags on every lawn in the neighborhood. In other years, I hung Lambrecht & Associates' star-spangled gifts in the garage, placing the sticks under cans of paint with care. Amid the controversy this year, the gift seemed an imposition: a political statement made on my family's behalf, on our plot of land, without our consent.

Until this year, I had greeted the flag on the lawn with a vague sense that it is more appropriate for Veterans Day and Memorial Day. What befits the Fourth is a revolutionary flag, either the Betsy Ross version or the snake on a background of red and blue stripes. This year, though, the right to choose the banner and how to use it made all the difference. Suddenly, I felt like a constitutional test case.

I looked at that mass-produced banner and thought: Don't make me do it. In the name of Patrick Henry and the non-name of the Unknown Soldier, I declare that tyranny forces my desecrating hand.

I placed the Lambrecht flag in a dry, empty kitchen sink. I held my breath and struck the match against its box, which bore a Made in the U.S.A. flag insignia. The flag seemed to put out the match. I noticed a small hole and tried again. A slower flameout, another small hole, but stripe-goo affixed itself to this match.

I had melted the American flag.

Most of the flag was still there, so I cut and tore, not wanting to leave a recognizable whole. I took that as a symptom of reverence.

Is melting and cleaving the flag a crime? What about breaking its stick? Most flags of this type wind up in garbage cans, which seems a far worse desecration, so next year Lambrecht could be setting up residents for criminal charges. The Realtors themselves might be prosecutable as accomplices.

In the larger sense, the flag-burning debate is about the freedom to use symbols as one chooses. No one has died for this symbol, but many have died for the republic for which it stands, even the ideals for which the republic stands.

In a more narrow sense, the matter is one of property rights. That's how the Founding Fathers would have seen it, being heavily into property themselves.

If I buy my flag for my house, whether it flies or burns is my decision. If you think my symbolic display betrays the memory of those who have died for the cause, you have a right to say so. I have a right to thank you for sharing your concerns and to say I honor their memory and keep their faith by allowing no government - and no American Legion - to say Thou Shalt Salute and

honor their memory and keep their faith by allowing no government - and no American Legion - to say Thou Shalt Salute and Thou Shalt Do With This Piece Of Cloth Only As We Tell You.

Whatever mode of protest is in fashion, whatever the political wind, we should never forget that other flag - the one with the snake. On it is inscribed the real American slogan, the rallying cry that articulates the spirit of 1776: "Don't tread on me." And don't tread on my lawn.

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