

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Citizen

Flagging Enthusiasm (Part 1)

"You're a grand old flag, you're a high flying flag, and forever in peace may you wave. You're the emblem of the land I love. The home of the free and the brave. Ev'ry heart beats true 'neath the Red, White, and Blue, Where there's never a boast or brag..."
– George M. Cohan (*despite his song, born on the 3rd of July!*)

I note, en passant, that June 14th was Flag Day. It commemorates the adoption, on June 14th, 1777, of a flag for the “thirteen united States of North America” (which was how that pre-national alliance was styled during the Rebellion), by resolution of the Second Continental Congress. President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation in 1916 officially establishing June 14th as Flag Day; National Flag Day was established by an Act of Congress in 1949.

However, Flag Day is not an official federal holiday, and I approach it with similar diffidence. I did not fly “Old Glory” on the bracket of my front porch or on my lawn flagpole. (The former proudly flies a green and white “Ecology” flag; the latter proudly flies the “Earth Flag,” a dark blue banner with a picture of the whole planet as seen from space.) I did not wear a flag pin, nor stick a flag magnet on my car, nor did I buy a small made-in-China flag in anticipation of the July 4th parade.

In fact, I find very few reminders of the US flag in my house other than some hand-out pads, pencils, nail files, and calendars from local businesses or political campaigns. I understand the transference of affection intended by the presenter, but the flag’s image no longer instills in me the old enthusiasm, patriotic fervor, or – unlike the previously-mentioned flags representing the values of ecological awareness and an interdependent and fragile planet – *pride*.

After 9/11/2001, there was a veritable orgy of “flaginess,” a paroxysm of red, white, and blue bursting from nearly every home, storefront, and gas-guzzler. Yet I don’t think it was an expression of pride so much as one of pain and shock, a reflex to a caught-off-guard punch to the gut. Whether this was a true emotional response bubbling up from a public adrift in fear, doubt, and confusion, or the scripted ploy of adept cynical manipulators of the masses, or some combination of both, *my* reaction was to stand back, and not get swallowed up in just what such mass behavior often portended... fear leading to focussed hate and anger, with convenient scapegoats and the inevitable march to find someone – *anyone* – to beat up on. It’s an old playbook, and Americans are no more immune than were previous victims of self-imposed or whipped-up descents into chest-thumping, saber-rattling, temporary irrationality.

And when this happens, why does it always seem to come wrapped in a flag? Because the flag is a simple, Pavlovian trigger mechanism that *demand*s respect and loyalty, that is *designed* to embody all that is what we *want to believe* we are, and to eliminate any rational thought, debate, dissent, or questioning. Which makes it so easy for tin-horn demagogues to magically communicate, without overtly saying it, “See, I’m standing in front of a big flag, and I have a flag pin on my lapel, and you’re all

waving flags, so we are obviously united and believe the same thing, and we are right, and what I say is so, and whatever we do is sanctioned and justified by this sacred symbol of our noblest ideals, blah, blah, blah.” You know, like killing in the name of the Prince of Peace, or destroying a village in order to save it.

And if you don’t get on board, and tape paper flags to your windows, and wrap yourself in the official rhetoric, *you* are suspect! “Are you not a patriot? Don’t you love your country? Say... maybe *you’re* one of *them!*” And so it goes... the drumbeat for war and vengeance, the suppression of dissent, the lies and acceptance of lies, the crimes and the cover-ups. All wrapped in the flag, with a serving of Mom’s apple pie, and a chorus of “God Bless America.”

Suddenly, one doesn’t feel *free* to speak one’s mind, or *brave* enough to go against the crowd. And then the purported steward of our national values *boasts* “Mission Accomplished” after a lie-based illegal invasion and occupation of a sovereign country, and *brags* “Bring ‘em on!” as prelude to the death and injury of tens of thousands more. The Stars & Stripes *forever waving* over “the long war” that never ends. Cohan must be spinning in his grave.

See, when you’re the “emblem of the land,” you not only represent the noble ideals you are *supposed* to stand for, but you become the all-too-visible symbol of *all* that is done in your name! Around the world, people see the US flag and it screams out to them: Gitmo, Abu Ghraib, blood for oil, overthrown governments (sometimes democracies, sometimes previously-CIA-installed “friendly” dictators who stopped being so cooperative), imposed indebtedness, rape of resources, world’s #1 arms merchant, crushing liberation movements, supporting brutal regimes, hypocritically yakking about spreading freedom and democracy abroad while housing the largest prison population (per capita and total) and suppressing or ignoring millions of votes and voters and stealing elections... in short, the world has *us* pegged as the political cartoon stereotype of a snarling, arrogant bully with big, muddy boots and dirty, grasping hands, wearing an Uncle Sam flag costume.

If the polls are any indication, I sense that more and more Americans are increasingly feeling likewise; a majority now feel our nation is heading in the wrong direction. And, whereas three-fourths of the US supported invading Iraq at the time, three-fourths now think it was, at least, a big mistake compounded by incompetent blundering (due to faulty intelligence and poor planning), or, at worst, a series of pre-meditated criminal acts worthy of impeachment. The approval ratings of the White House occupant *and* Congress are at near-historic lows. How many lies, mealy-mouthed excuses, scandals, distractions, and sloganeerings can a nation take before it says, “Enough!”?

I noticed very few US flags out on Flag Day. I see far fewer flags on cars and windows, and those I see seem to have several years worth of fading. Wouldn’t it be ironic if the very same self-righteous hyper-chauvinists who most exploited and flogged the flag in our faces to further their political agendas were the ones most responsible for an increasing number of us feeling, dare I say, *ashamed* to claim this flag as ours?

Next, in Part 2: Why I won’t pledge allegiance to the flag in public. (But then, I believe, neither would James Madison or Thomas Jefferson!)