The American Legion

ADVANCE

National Headquarters Monthly Publication For Post Commanders and Post Adjutants

SPECIAL ISSUE SPECIAL ISSUE SPECIAL ISSUE

'OLD GLORY' NEEDS YOU!

By H. F. "SPARKY" GIERKE

National Commander, The American Legion

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

— First Amendment

When our Founding Fathers wrote the First Amendment to the Constitution, they made clear certain basic freedoms to be extended to all citizens. Eloquent in its simplicity, this first article of our Bill of Rights sets forth certain unalienable rights never before guaranteed to a nation's people. Surely when they had finished writing, the authors looked upon their work with a certain sense of pride, for even the most common of people would have no difficulty understanding their rights.

As I now re-read this basic statement of human dignity and ponder the body of law that has sprung up around it, I ask myself how, in the name of all that our nation stands for, could our highest court interpret these words to mean that it's okay to burn our flag in protest?

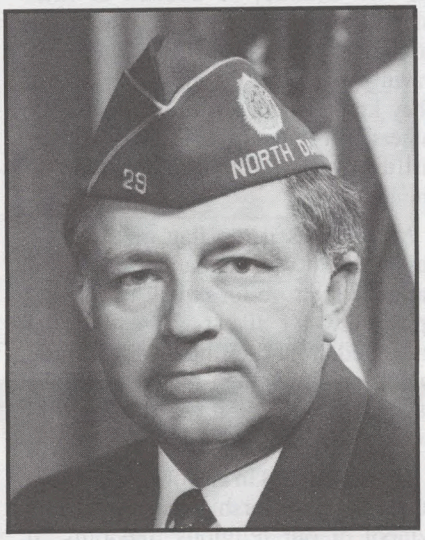
On June 2lst, Gregory Lee Johnson carved out his own tawdry little niche in history by challenging our right to protect from desecration the one symbol of our nation that has stood tall through shot and shell, and been purchased with the blood of patriots. Outside of an arena in Dallas where the Republican National Convention was being held in l984, Johnson burned the United States Flag while he and fellow demonstrators chanted, "America, the red, white and blue, we spit on you!"

Then, when the state of Texas prosecuted him for flag desecration, he wrapped himself up in the same flag he had burned and spat upon, and sought protection under the law it symbolizes. Eventually the Supreme Court heard the case and ruled that desecration of the flag as a form of political expression was permissible under the freedom of speech clause of the First Amendment.

There are some who feel that the high court's split decision merely reinforces the strength of our laws, in that we can tolerate the most repugnant of acts and extend First Amendment protection to those who exploit the very laws that shield them. There are some who feel that Johnson's victory is a victory for us all because it keeps us off that "slippery slope" whereupon our freedom of speech would surely slide away if curtailed in any manner. There are some who feel that this case proves that our flag is a political icon and nothing more.

That's how some people feel. I feel sick, right to the pit of my stomach. It is difficult to speak about what has happened, yet it is impossible to be silent.

What has happened to our nation? Why are we now debating the political and intellectual ramifications of the



decision? Why are we patiently listening to the drivel about how it enriches our American heritage? Why do we feel no joy over this great constitutional victory?

I'll tell you why. We're dumbfounded. We know in our gut that this is wrong. We know that neither our Founding Fathers, nor our Congressmen, nor anyone in the history of our republic ever intended that anybody should be allowed to burn the very flag that has been draped on the caskets of those who died to preserve all that it represents.

Let the whole world intellectualize it, and it won't change a thing. Let the whole world politicize it, and it won't change a thing. This is neither a liberal issue nor a conservative issue. Our flag is neither a Republican flag nor a Democratic flag. Old Glory doesn't subscribe to any creed but the American creed.

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'Old Glory' needs you . .

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Some take queer comfort in their belief that the court's decision is merely an admission of reality. They point to the "gross commercialization" of the flag as it hails from the roof of the corner filling station or grocery store. Rubbish. It flies as a celebration of our free enterprise system that affords every man and woman the opportunity to pursue their own private dreams as far as their talents and skills will take them.

We are a nation born of immigrants, many of whom risked their lives to live under this flag. Whether they crossed the Rio Grande, or docked at Ellis Island or in San Francisco, one of the first sights they beheld was Old Glory waving proudly in the air that was free. They knew it was not the flag of their fathers, but it would be the flag of their children, and of their children's children.

Neither was it the flag of a perfect nation, but it was the banner of a good nation that strove for equal justice and opportunity for all. It was a flag that embodied all of their hopes for a better tomorrow. It was their flag, and not the flag of their king — it was the flag they would revere, protect and even die for.

Our flag stands in an honored place in our houses of worship because it is a symbol of our religious freedoms. It waves over our schools as a testament to our heritage and to the freedoms of opportunity and free expression. It flies over our state houses and federal buildings as testimony to our representative form of government. And it flies in our yards and from our homes as a reminder that we are a free people today because of those who paid a dear price throughout all of our yesterdays.

Many a Gold Star Mother knows only too well what our flag means. I met such a mother during a recent visit to Pennsylvania, a woman who had lost a son in Vietnam. She told me that each time she looks at or touches that folded flag presented to her by a grateful nation, she remembers her son and senses his presence. It's easy to imagine what she is feeling right now.

Is there any argument which could persuade any of us who have followed our flag into harm's way that it's now okay to tear it from its flagstaff, douse it with lighter fluid, spit on it, curse it and burn it...as an expression of free speech protected by the Constitution it symbolizes?

You don't have to be a veteran to understand what the American flag means, nor do you have to be a "super patriot" to understand that the symbols of our freedom deserve to be protected. Tens of thousands of brave, selfless American men and women have died to protect our flag from hand of our enemies. We have a sacred obligation to ensure that their flag will not now be desecrated by those they died to protect.

Therefore, I am asking every Legionnaire and every American to join with me in the exercise of our own First Amendment right to "petition the Government for a redress of grievances." We must rally round our flag and demand a constitutional amendment making flag desecration a crime. In the words of Edmund Burke, "It is not what a lawyer tells me to do; but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I ought to do."

And what we ought to do — what we must do — is send the message to Washington that "we, the people" will not allow anyone to legally desecrate the Flag of the United States of America. Our Posts have already started petitions, but you are grassroots America. I am asking each of you to go into your communities armed with a petition simply stating: *"We, the undersigned, hereby petition the adoption and ratification of an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, providing that desecration of the Flag of the United States of America shall be a crime."*

The American Legion

ADVANCE

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MEMBER

AMERICAN LEGION PRESS ASSOCIATION

Editor: Frank L. Megnin

Send all petitions to American Legion National Headquarters. My successor, who will be elected next month at the Baltimore National Convention, will present your petitions to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate when he testifies to Congress on September 19.

This issue will not resolve itself. The Supreme Court's decision can only be reversed by the manifested will of a people who are stirred to action. It is an evil thing for a nation to permit its sacred symbols to be freely desecrated; it cheapens the lives and sacrifices of those who gave their last full measure of devotion for their country. Yet, as a wise man once observed, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

We stand on a slippery slope, indeed, if we as a nation are not sufficiently offended by the desecration of our sacred symbols to be moved to action. I am confident, however, that we stand on firm ground and the will of the people shall prevail. We will have a redress of grievances that recognizes the rights of the millions who revere our flag and deeply oppose the destruction of the primary symbol of our American freedom.

(Editor's Note: An article similar to this one appeared in the July 3 issue of *USA Today.*).

About the petition on the next page:

Make extra copies of the petition form on the next page and have your members obtain as many signatures as possible. Please print the name of your state in block letters at the top of the petition form. Enlist the help of other community organizations in this campaign to protect the Flag of the United States from acts of desecration. Mail all completed petition forms to The American Legion, P.O. Box 538, Indianapolis, Ind. 46206.

PETITION

We, the undersigned, hereby petition the adoption and ratification of an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, providing that desecration of the Flag of the United States shall be a crime.

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(Mail petitions to: The American Legion, P.O. Box 538, Indianapolis, IN 46206.)

Court's decision presents challenge

As the reaction to the Supreme Court's decision unfolds, it is obvious there is a "challenge" The American Legion, the Auxiliary, and the Sons of The American Legion cannot let go unmet. Many, too many, Americans simply do not understand the Flag's symbolism.

The American Legion takes justifiable pride in its role as a primary mover in the area of proper Flag etiquette and display. We were instrumental in codifying the provisions of the Flag Code in the 1920's. The Legion led the way in having these rules of etiquette adopted by Congress in the 1940's. The establishment of the desecration law in the late 1960's was prompted by The American Legion. Now, in one swift stroke of the pen, our efforts are cast in doubt and controversy.

There can be no doubt, there should be no controversy, the Flag of the United States must be protected from the abuse of those who would condemn her. That is the **"CHALLENGE."**

The education of our young citizens to the symbolism of the Flag is the most important element to meet this challenge. Laws or a Constitutional Amendment to protect the Flag may take many months or years to accomplish, but the education of our children must begin today if they are to ever understand the purpose of such action.

Your post, unit, or squadron, working together, should take immediate steps to promote the proper care, display, and respect for the Flag in your community. Here are some suggestions.

Post/Unit/Squadron —

The effort must begin with ourselves; actions speak louder than words:

- Put up a new Flag at your Post Home or meeting place. Check it regularly to keep it clean and brilliant. Place a light on it and display it 24 hours every day.
- Distribute to your members copies of the Flag Code. Encourage them to display the Flag at their homes every day. Provide or make available Flag lapel pins and ask them to wear the pin every day.
- Hold a joint patriotic meeting/activity, inviting all of the family members, and discuss proper Flag etiquette and display.
- Include in all newsletters reminders about Flag display.

In the schools —

Contact school officials now about patriotic activities and programs which the organization can provide during the school year. Of immediate concern would be Citizenship Day, Sept. 17; Constitution Week, Sept. 17-23; and Veterans Day, Nov. 11. Additional activities could include —

- Provide a new Flag for the school's flagpole and replace as necessary.
- Provide a Flag for every classroom and/or replace faded Flags or those in disrepair. Encourage daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Provide the various publications regarding patriotism, Americanism, and Flag etiquette for classroom use.
- Provide a color guard and/or train a student color guard to present the Flag at all school functions.
- Encourage announcements regarding proper behavior during the presentation of the Flag and during the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and rendition of the National Anthem.
- Implement patriotic essay, poster, and coloring contests at every level.

In the community —

Make your post a leader in the community to foster respect and honor for the Flag. Continually encourage the display of the Flag at homes, businesses, and community events. Prior to special occasions, provide press releases to remind community members to display their Flags. Such occasions would include:

August 19 - Aviation Day
September 4 - Labor Day
September 24 - Gold Star Mothers Day
October 9 - Columbus Day
October 27 - Navy Day
November 11 - Veterans Day
November 23 - Thanksgiving Day
December 23 - Hanukkah
December 25 - Christmas
January 1 - New Year's Day

Other activities could include —

- Petition drives, utilizing the petition included in this publication.
- Flag etiquette displays in shopping malls, libraries, community centers, etc. Distribute copies of the Flag Code, Flag lapel pins and information on obtaining Flags and poles.
- Organize Flag displays on downtown streets, community parks and other areas of high visibility.
- Recognition of businesses who display the Flag daily.
- Purchase newspaper space to promote Flag display.
- Hold patriotic programs adopting the format from one of the programs outlined in the Americanism Manual and/or Officer's Guide.

Materials —

Wherever possible, provide the information and materials at little or no cost to the general public. Emphasize proper Flag etiquette and promote patriotism.

The following are available from Emblem Sales: Flags, poles and stands in a variety of sizes, miniature historical flags, lapel pins, Flag tabs, Flag Codes, *Let's Be Right On Flag Etiquette* and *Our Country's Flag*, and laminated posters entitled; "I Am Your Heritage, I Am Your Flag." Consult your latest Emblem Sales catalog.

The **"CHALLENGE"** is before us. Organize your efforts to educate your community on this important issue.

NOTE TO EDITORS PERMISSION GRANTED TO USE OR REPRINT ALL "ADVANCE" ITEMS.