

University of Southern California Law

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"America the Beautiful"

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Mary L. Dudziak
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A ROW of American flags lines the walk of the home across the street from mine. They appear on car windows, on radio antennas. Stores across the nation are sold-out of American flags.

"Why don't we have one?" my 10-year-old daughter asked me. I wasn't sure what to say. At this moment of national pain, at this moment when we are so united as a nation in our grief, how could I explain to her my fears about the dark side of nationalism?

I am donating blood, I am donating money. I am talking with my students about our reactions to this profound national tragedy. At a time when political differences seem to dissolve as we feel a deep need to draw together as a country, how do we wrap ourselves in the symbols of national unity without losing our vigilance against the intolerance that has sometimes been committed in the name of American nationalism?

Patriotism and national unity blossomed in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Americans felt a new purpose in saluting the flag. Yet in the name of national unity, children were expelled from school when, following religious beliefs, they refused to salute the flag. "National unity is the basis of national security," U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter argued in upholding the state of Pennsylvania's compulsory flag salute law.

Restrictions on freedom of conscience was not all that befell Jehovah's Witnesses during the national crisis of World War II. In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's flag-salute ruling, violence against Jehovah's Witnesses increased. Many were beaten, tarred and feathered and run out of town. It was only three years before the court reversed itself. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson then wrote:

"Struggles to coerce uniformity of sentiment in support of some end thought essential to their time and country have been waged by many good as well as by evil men. . . . Those who begin coercive elimination of dissent soon find themselves exterminating dissenters. Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard."

During World War II, the American flag was a poignant symbol in internment camps for Americans of Japanese descent. The flag flew above the barbed wire fences and armed guard posts that eviscerated the rights of peaceful American citizens and immigrants. The flag also framed memorial displays in camp quarters for the Nisei sons who gave their lives in the war as American soldiers.

National symbols have been used by agents of repression. Yet the danger lies not in the symbols themselves, but in what they are taken to mean.

That message was present in the memorial displays of interned war mothers during World War II. It was reminded to me this morning in the words of another symbol, an American song.

My daughter's drama teacher, Scott Weintraub, helped me with how to think about the flag, and how to talk to my child about national symbols. He closed a school meeting last Friday

morning by singing "America the Beautiful."

All the parents joined in. Like most Americans, we only knew the first verse. Yet we would sing all the verses, Weintraub said. And it became clear that the full meaning of the song, the full meaning of this national symbol, was present in the verses, but often forgotten.

The full version of Katherine Lee Bates' 1913 text celebrates America's "purple mountain majesties," and "amber waves of grain." It speaks of pilgrims and American heroes, and the

"patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!"

Yet it paints a vision of not a perfect America. It is instead a nation to be celebrated and embraced, while at the same time, Bates urged self-criticism and restraint:

"America! America!
God mend thine every flaw
Confirm thy soul in self-control
Thy liberty in law!"

This fuller understanding of the song helped us to see a broader meaning even in the language we had long remembered. "America the Beautiful" is not a song embracing an inherent privilege in American power. Bates' wish was for the nation to be crowned with "brotherhood." This was something the nation could strive and hope for, even while the nation itself was celebrated.

Through her words we can see, in our national symbols like the flag, the promise of a search for equality and tolerance, and a vision of national unity we can strive for without fear.

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