

Does That Star-Spangled Banner Yet Wave?

John 8:31-32; 2 Chronicles 7:14

For twenty-two years, Norma Rinck had been a respected librarian in the former Soviet Union. In her words, she had a “good future, a good apartment, and a good life.” On her own television talk show she discussed the latest books on engineering. But something seemed to be missing. Even today she finds it difficult to explain.

One day Norma walked away from all that and immigrated to the United States, where she found a tiny apartment in Long Island City, New York. She described her feelings: “It’s hard to explain. It’s why zoo animals that are well fed and well cared for walk out when the cage door is left open. At first I worked in an American factory for only a few dollars an hour. But I sang to myself because I was free.” (*Reader’s Digest*, December 1987)

The *Times* of Hong Kong once carried a little story of a man who lived in Warsaw, Poland, during the Communist oppression. One day he went to the police station to ask for permission to move to Western Europe. The police asked, “Aren’t you happy here?” to which the man replied, “I have no complaints.” So they asked, “But are you dissatisfied with your work?” to which the man replied, “I have no complaints.”

“Then why do you want to go west?” they asked. The man’s answer revealed his true feelings: “Because there I can have complaints.” (*Reader’s Digest*, June 1979).

Here in America, we have a piece of cloth which symbolizes our freedom. Yet it is a symbol too few understand. For years people have laughed and talked at sporting events while a few sing our national anthem. At the School of Art Institute of Chicago, visitors once were invited to walk on an American flag spread on the floor as part of an exhibit. (*Newsweek*, July 3, 1989). Lee Bach, a World War II Navy veteran living in Las Cruces, New Mexico, was convicted in 1989 of violating a city ordinance regarding noise because the 3’x5’ flag he flew outside his home flapped too loudly to suit his neighbors. He would have faced 90 days in jail and a \$300 fine if he refused to stop flying the flag of the United States of America outside his own home, had not a judge thrown out the conviction.

The same week, on Wednesday, June 22, 1989, the United States Supreme Court aroused the wrath of liberals and conservatives alike. Since that day, the public desecration of the flag of the United States of America has been protected by the

First Amendment of our Constitution as a political protest. Thanks to the wisdom of those justices, the flag of the United States can be walked upon, spat upon, shot, cut, ripped, burned or even dragged through the dirt, all as part of your right to free speech here in our country. But don't burn the flag of another country or you'll be arrested. Just ask the man who was fed up with talk of amnesty and illegal immigrants, and burned a Mexican flag in front of the Alamo in May of 2006, and then was arrested.

People in China can go to jail for three years for burning a Chinese flag. It's three years in Germany and Turkey. In Hong Kong it's \$2,000 and twelve months. All across the world, you can get into some serious trouble by burning the flag of any particular country, but not of the United States of America.

One cartoonist in the Providence *Journal-Bulletin* expressed his contempt for the decision of the Supreme Court by drawing four little pictures. Over them he asked the question, "Which of the following is legal?" In the first frame, he showed a man trying to hitchhike. Illegal! The second showed a little boy spitting on the sidewalk. Illegal! The third depicted a car left in a "No Parking" zone. Illegal!

The fourth frame showed a man standing on one end of the U.S. flag with a gas can in one hand, and the fist of the other hand raised in the air, as flames began to consume the flag on the other end (as seen in the Clarksdale, Mississippi, *Press Register*, June 26, 1989.) It is shameful that the United States of America suddenly became a country where one can be punished for spitting on the sidewalk, but allowed to burn our flag.

In a speech in Australia, Prince Charles of England once said, "A country free enough to examine its own conscience is a land worth living in, a nation to be envied." Perhaps it's time for our country to engage in an examination of our nation's conscience.

One newspaper columnist (Ray Mosby: "Let's honor, not burn the flag") reminded his readers of what would happen to the man who chiseled off the nose of one of the presidential faces of Mt. Rushmore. Another (Sid Salter: "Let Congress know: enough's enough") wondered how it could be that the First Amendment should protect those who wish to burn our flag as an expression of free speech, yet not protect those who wish to burn leaves in their own yards (both articles in Clarksdale, MS, *Press Register*, July 1, 1989, p. 5A).

The decision of the Supreme Court was split in a 5-4 vote. One of the dissenting justices, John Paul Stevens, described in his written minority opinion that the flag is a symbol of the strength and courage that made America a great power. He

wrote, "If those ideas are worth fighting for, it cannot be true that the flag that uniquely symbolizes their power is not itself worthy of protection." *Newsweek* reported that one group gathered on the steps of the Supreme Court building and set fire to a mock justice's robe as an expression of their freedom to protest the decision (July 3, 1989, pp. 18-20).

While the whole world watches with keen interest, dissidents in the Middle East are fighting for something so intangible that they can't even hold it in their hands, yet so valued that they are willing to put their lives on the line. If beings from another planet are monitoring the goings on from outer space, they might wonder, "What is this thing called 'freedom'?"

To find the answer, perhaps these aliens would turn their scanners in the direction of a country known for its freedom. But as they studied freedom as it exists in America, they would become more confused than ever. If they studied our history, they'd discover that at one time we were populated by a people willing to die for the right to be free.

They would examine the works of poets, composers and authors who have attempted to describe the essence of freedom. The extra-terrestrial beings would discover that our freedom here in America is so desirable that many have willingly died that others could be free. Yet it is so delicate and so fragile that it must be monitored continuously lest someone take it from us. We're told that you cannot kill a frog by dropping it into a pot of boiling water, because it will jump out immediately. But if you put it into cold water, and heat the water gradually, the frog will cook because it will never realize the difference until it is too late. Should someone attempt to take away our freedoms with a sudden action, we Americans would rebel fiercely. But let someone steal it from us gradually, and we seldom notice the difference.

Perhaps those who watched us from outer space would conclude that freedom has several inherent dangers. They would learn that any nation which has fought for its freedom soon grows complacent about that freedom. The longer a nation has it, the more likely it is to lose it, just because people who are free no longer have to fight for their freedom.

It is so sad that we who once were described with words such as "brave," "noble," "patriot," or "gallant," no longer even know the meaning of the word "freedom," except when it comes to our own individual civil rights. We seem to have lost the

larger perspective of freedom as it affects our nation. You see, when I no longer care about your freedom, I soon grow complacent about my own.

The complacency first shows itself through the little expressions of freedom which are taken for granted by our country's people. Take our public libraries for example. Patricia Wahler wrote in *Reader's Digest* a few years ago (December 1988) that she was working at a public library when she met a young immigrant from South America. She explained how the public library system worked while he gazed on the thousands of books on the shelves with an expression of awe written on his face. He asked, "You mean I can read all these books for free?" He dropped into the nearest chair and said, "Well, I'm ready. Please bring me the first one."

David Shipler, in the *New York Times*, told of a Russian woman visiting New York City for the first time. She maintained a stoic "ours is better" attitude as her hostess proudly showed her the Lincoln Center, the Empire State Building, and the Manhattan skyline. Nothing seemed to impress this woman. Then her hostess took her into a supermarket. The Russian woman stood there among the seemingly endless aisles of fresh vegetables, red meat and frozen foods—and wept.

When Francis Scott Key wrote the words to a song which would become our national anthem, he asked a question, a question which haunts us even today: "*O say, does that Star-spangled banner yet wave/O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*"

Sure, the flag of the United States is still flown at sporting events and before public buildings and some churches, ours included. We still say the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag occasionally. But recent events in our own history give us cause to ask ourselves once again, this time with much more gravity, "*Does that Star-spangled banner yet wave/O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*"

For some it does. Those who have sacrificed something in the fight for the freedoms we enjoy here in America would claim that it still flies just as proudly as ever. They are joined by those who have not forgotten the high cost paid by others in battlefields around the world, or in the streets or courtrooms here in our own country. Yet we forget too soon that America is as proud and strong as she is today because of the blessings of God on this country. As we see the increasing erosion of biblical principles we also see the erosion of the ideals which have built this country.

The decision made by the United States Supreme Court is only a symptom of a deeper sickness being experienced by our nation. Why should it surprise any of us that a nation which allows the unlimited slaughter of millions of unborn babies, no longer should have any respect for the symbol of its freedom? Why should it surprise any of us that those values for which many have died should be disgraced in such a way, when the majority of Americans on any given Sunday will not be in church of any description to participate in worship?

Wilferd Peterson once wrote a little piece describing his love for our country:

Scoop up a handful of soil and you will hold in your hand the miracle of America.

The precious grains of sand and loam reflect a nation of contrasts:

The unlimited horizons of sweeping plains, burning deserts and rolling prairies.

The tranquility of snug harbors, quiet valleys, and shining inland lakes.

The energy of thundering waterfalls, roaring cities, and the flaming sky of steel mills.

The neighborliness of old rail-fences, railroads, and highways tying a nation together.

The challenge of snow-capped mountains and giant trees towering into the sky.

The laughter of merry little brooks babbling their way to the sea.

The promise of the deep straight furrows of the plowmen.

The bounty of vast fields of waving grain.

The power of mighty waves pounding a rockbound coast.

The beauty of snow on hemlock trees, violets peeping through the sod, and the dashing splashes of color of autumn woods.

The inspiration of the lights of a great city at night, seen from the window of an airliner.

The noise of factory whistles calling a nation to work.

The silence of the everlasting stars.

This is America.

This is the land we love.

That's beautiful, isn't it? Yet it could describe many countries around our world. The strength and beauty of America is not to be found merely in the wonders of nature or the power of her cities. It is not to be found merely in the diversity of its people. It is not even to be found in her toleration of those who disagree with her. The strength and beauty of America are to be seen in the underlying Scriptural principles which have motivated men and women around the world in all times to seek freedom for themselves. It is that built-in awareness that human beings are created in the image of God, who is Himself the Author of Freedom.

You see, our freedom in America is only a glimmer of the freedom God has provided us through Christ! Jesus came to the earth for the expressed purpose of giving us spiritual liberty. Jesus once quoted the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

And Jesus reminded us in John 8:

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He also said, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:31b-32, 36)

Henry Carey wonders in a piece he wrote called *The Penny*:

Suppose our civilization were destroyed and our cities laid completely in waste. Suppose in twenty-thousand years an archaeologist from another society were poking around the ruins of your city. If he could dig up just one penny, he would know this about us:

The coin is made of a blend of metals; that would tell him that we were miners and knew the science of metallurgy. By the shape of the coin, a perfect circle, he'd know that we understood geometry. The wheat on the back of the coin would tell him that we had been a great agricultural country. He'd know that we considered our fine crops a major source of our wealth. The date on the face of the coin would show him we understood arithmetic and that we had a calendar.

The portrait of Abraham Lincoln would mark us as artists who had an advanced culture. The words “United States” would let him know that we were a federated group of local communities bound together by a strong central government. The phrase ‘e pluribus unum’ would tell him we were scholars who knew foreign languages. The word ‘Liberty’ right on the face of the penny would let the archaeologist know that our country sought to guarantee freedom for every man.

And finally, that phrase ‘In God We Trust’: it would tell him we had a moral law. It would let him know that we had grown strong and mighty under God's great hand. And then, considering the penny, he might wonder—why did they ever go astray?

“O say, does that Star-spangled Banner yet wave/O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” The answer to that question may be disputed because of events over the past several years, yet the answer is ultimately left up to each one of us. Because no matter how far we come, we are always brought back to reality by these ancient words:

If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14).