

What So Proudly We Haïled

At the Jan. 6 rally in Washington D.C., those of us entering the VIP section were required to throw our tote bags in the trash. We divvied up various items, threw the rest away, and entered the grounds.

When we left the rally, someone had emptied all of those cans onto the street and the muddy ground of the entranceway. Dozens of people were picking through this trash, looking for their belongings, and my daughter, her friend, and I all found our bags. They were a little worse for wear, flecked here and there with mud, but still usable.

I also found fifteen American flags lying in a cluster in that mud and grass.

The police had forbidden flags on poles in the VIP area, even small ones such as these, and I guess they dumped them in with the rest of the trash.

Call it the Boy Scout in me, but I picked up those flags, all of which were somehow still in pristine condition, wrapped them in a bundle, and carried them to the Lincoln Memorial where our ride home awaited us. Those emblematic orphans are now sitting in a chair on the front porch of my house.

Old Glory. The Stars and Stripes. The Red, White, and Blue. The Star-Spangled Banner. The Grand Old Flag.

The American flag.

That flag has taken a lot of hits lately. Protesters have burned flags at their “peaceful” rallies. Some have cursed the country for which it stands. Some now see an American flag in the yard of a house as a sign that the owner is a fascist. And now someone saw fit to throw that flag onto the muddy ground.

The tumultuous events following the rally and the march on the

Capitol have since caused me to ask myself what the flag stands for.

For me, that piece of cloth embodies so many ideas and ideals that to describe them all in this space is impossible. We face that banner when we sing our National Anthem, hands over our hearts. We turn to it when we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, saying "to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all."

Woven into that banner are the words from the Declaration of Independence, "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Constitution with the Bill of Rights, those amendments proclaiming our liberties as natural rights rather than favors given us by any government, are also in the fabric of our flag. In those stars and stripes is the promise that we are a nation of laws, not of men.

In that flag I see the faces of those who have gone before us and shaped our country—the pioneers, slaves, Indians, immigrants from around the world, craftsmen and inventors, farmers and shopkeepers, and mothers and fathers. Here, too I see figures from our history books—Washington, John and Abigail Adams, Booker T. Washington, and an army of others whose achievements created the country I love.

Old Glory has waved above many a battlefield on which Americans fought and died to retain their freedom: Chickamauga, Gettysburg, Okinawa, Normandy, and a thousand other places, many of them now forgotten by most of us. Those red stripes in our flag represent hardiness and bravery, true, but also the blood of all those who paid the ultimate price defending their country.

As we all know, our country is deeply divided right now. The mayhem at the Capitol Building and the discord following is just the latest sign of that division, one more example of our fractured culture, which some are even now using to further

separate us.

Many of us have forgotten we are all Americans. Some political leaders, members of the mainstream media, and our cultural gurus want us divided by race, gender, or ideology. We must always resist these devious maneuvers.

We are, first and foremost, Americans living under one flag. Until we recognize that truth, we will go on beating one another up, figuratively and sometimes literally.

On holidays such as the Fourth of July and Memorial Day, my wife, prior to her death, used to line the sidewalk in front of our house with flags like the ones I rescued at the rally. As I pondered what to do with the flags I had retrieved, I decided to follow her example, but expand the enterprise. On pleasant days, I will stick the poles of five of those flags into the earth along the walkway leading up to my front porch. The others I will distribute to my grandchildren.

Maybe someone will take note of those sidewalk flags and remember who we are.

I took a break from writing this piece at 7:20 this morning and stepped to the back deck of the house. The rising sun, still partially hidden by the pines at the edge of the yard, made a flag of the sky, painting it with red, white, and blue stripes. "Red sky in morning, sailors take warning" runs the old adage, but that spectacle of nature "at the dawn's early light" brought tears of wonder to my eyes.

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