

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## **From the Ashes Comes the Rebirth of Patriotism**

WALTER BERNS

Page | 1

*The ghastly terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 shocked our nation out of its complacency regarding peace and security within our borders and awakened us to new threats from a post-Cold War world that many people thought was no longer dangerous to us. As political leaders struggled to find the appropriate responses, the nation spontaneously displayed a surge of patriotic sentiment and expression. Less than one month after the attack, Walter Berns (b. 1919), distinguished political scientist, constitutional scholar, and author of *Making Patriots* (2001), wrote this essay on the meaning of the new surge of patriotism and why we were now waving the flag. By his life as well as his scholarship, Berns was well prepared for the topic. He enlisted in the Navy before Pearl Harbor and served at sea during the entire course of World War II. Among his earliest memories is a 1926 Memorial Day parade down Chicago's Michigan Avenue and the impressive sight of aged Union veterans feebly carrying the regimental standards.*

*What, according to Berns, explains the upsurge of American patriotism after 9/11? Why was it especially concentrated in displays of the flag? What are we doing when we honor the flag in the post-9/11 world? Is it only our enemies who can inspire such outpourings of national feeling and attachment to the flag?*

The terrorist attacks of September 11 have inspired a greater outpouring of patriotism by the American people than have many previous wars, and numerous displays of the American flag symbolize that patriotism. The flag represents more than free speech; it reminds us of those who fought before us to preserve our freedom. . . .

To help us remember, we have a Memorial Day (Decoration Day when I was young), and the Lincoln, Vietnam, Korean, and (eventually) World War II memorials. To the same end, we have national cemeteries filled with the graves of patriots, and a national anthem composed during a long-past war. This nation was born in a war, and Abraham Lincoln referred to those who fought it as “the patriots of ’76.” We were “one people” then—we said so. We were made one because King George III and “our British brethren

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

[were] deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.” What those foes did to rally patriotism in 1776, the terrorists did on September 11.

The signs of this upsurge are everywhere. The grass-roots response of the American people has been phenomenal, a display of bottom-up public patriotism unseen in this nation in at least half a century, slicing across boundaries of race, class, age, and gender. American flags fly from the antennas of battered pickup trucks, from stately Victorian porches, from office windows. An Indiana flag company reports it has never had this many orders, twenty-five times the norm, in its century-long existence.

Page | 2

The flag is everywhere, and so is the need of the people to display their love of country.

It was only a few years ago that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Americans were entitled to burn the flag, that they had a constitutional right to do so. Of course, the ruling did not deny Americans their constitutional right to fly the flag, and in September millions of people proceeded to do so. Those who did not own a flag rushed out to buy one, in such numbers that supplies were soon exhausted.

## *Grieving for Fellow Citizens*

Americans are flying the flag again, and they are showing their patriotism in other ways. Told that blood was in short supply, they rushed to give their own; volunteers from around the country raced to the scene of devastation in New York with food, blankets, gas masks, whatever they thought was needed. Americans grieved for the dead there, in Washington, and in Pennsylvania as their own, and prayed for the bereaved left behind. It was as if they now remembered that, as St. Paul said in his Epistle to the Romans, we are “members one of another.”

Americans had every reason to believe this. The terrorists did not discriminate; they killed them all: black, white, brown and Asian, rich and poor, old and young, Christian, Jew, Muslim, and infidel. Some of the victims were foreigners, but the rest were unhyphenated Americans, fellow citizens, if not personal friends or immediate neighbors.

Across the nation, there was no more talk of us and them, as in our usual political dialogue. The only “them” were the terrorists who, though it was certainly not their



# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

## *The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

intent, united us. The terrorists unwittingly reminded us that this country is, as Lincoln said it was during the worst of wars, “the last, best hope of earth. . . .”

Now we are at war with them, and we certainly will not win easily. The people sense this, I suspect, and it is astonishing how they have reacted. Not since Pearl Harbor, and perhaps not even then, has there been anything like it.

Page | 3

There surely was nothing like it during the years of Korea, Vietnam, or even the Gulf War. Not then did crowds of people gather in the streets shouting, “USA, USA, USA!” And not in such numbers did they fly flags from front porches, balconies, and automobiles. Flying it is the readiest way of expressing their love of country, and this they did in the millions because, I believe, they realize that this country is threatened in a new way.

### *Inspiring a Sense of Duty*

In 1776, Tom Paine spoke of “the summer soldier and sunshine patriot who will shrink from the service of their country.” A few years later, and to the same effect, Alexander Hamilton said, “The industrious habits of the people of the present day, absorbed in the pursuits of gain and devoted to the improvements of agriculture and commerce, are incompatible with the condition of a nation of soldiers.”<sup>1</sup>

Paine and Hamilton had reason to be apprehensive. After all, we are a people endowed with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a happiness that each of us defines for himself. Nothing is said about our duties; in fact, the only duty mentioned in the Declaration of Independence is the duty derived from the right to “throw off” the government that does not secure rights. Our duties are secondary and have to be cultivated, whereas our rights are primary.

So it is that our civil libertarians, of the Right and Left alike, see us not as citizens, but as autonomous individuals with the right to say what we please without regard to consequence. So it was that the Supreme Court, however narrow the majority, declared that we have a constitutional right to burn the flag. This was, in my view, a mistake of

---

<sup>1</sup> Read Thomas Paine’s *The Crisis No. 1* at *What So Proudly We Hail*: [www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/the-crisis-no-1](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/the-crisis-no-1). Read Federalist 8 at [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1\\_8\\_12s12.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_8_12s12.html).

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

consequence because the flag, from the beginning, has been a means to cultivate patriotism, the ultimate duty.

The flag carried by the Continental Army in January 1776 had thirteen stripes and the British ensign in the upper left-hand corner. But after we declared our independence in July of that year, the Continental Congress resolved “the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation,” which is to say, a new kind of country.

Page | 4

Eventually, Congress declared the “Star-Spangled Banner” to be the national anthem, and June 14 to be Flag Day; later still, John Philip Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever” was designated the national march. As James Madison indicated in the forty-ninth *Federalist* treatise,<sup>2</sup> republican government especially requires public-spiritedness, and Congress obviously intended the celebration of the flag—on Flag Day, for example—to be one of the means of promoting it. And so it has been.

The Supreme Court, speaking through Justice William J. Brennan, ruled that the flag stands for freedom of expression (and burning it is one form of expression). But we who do not burn it pledge allegiance “to the flag, and to the republic for which it stands.” The flag and republic obviously stand for more than freedom of speech (to say nothing of freedom of expression). I do not mean to belittle the importance of free speech; it is an essential feature of republican government. I only mean to say that the flag stands for everything the country stands for, and therefore Justice Brennan’s understanding is partial or incomplete. It cannot explain why the flag is, as Brennan called it, “a cherished emblem.”

## *Why We Wave the Flag*

Nor can it explain why millions of Americans fly the flag today, even as so many of us are removed from the rubble in New York and Washington, and the fields of Pennsylvania. The fact is, the flag is used to express what is in the hearts and minds of Americans.

We wave it on Flag Day and the Fourth of July, and see it displayed at the various war memorials on the Mall in the capital; on the battlefields at Bull Run and Antietam; at

---

<sup>2</sup> Read *Federalist* 49 at <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch2s19.html>.



# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

the cemeteries where those who fought and died are buried, not only in Arlington or Gettysburg, but in faraway places like Manila in the Philippines, at Cambridge in England, and above Omaha Beach in Normandy. The sight of the flag, especially in these places, evokes memories of past battles and of those who fought them, to whom we are indebted.

Page | 5

This country has had its share of summer soldiers and sunshine patriots, but they have been few compared with the millions of Americans who, over the course of our history, have been willing to put their lives at risk for its principles. We know little about these people save for that fact, and the knowledge that they must have wanted the country to endure. But we can deduce something else about them: that they felt obligated to their forebears and their posterity, the forebears because from them they had inherited a country worth fighting and dying for (this “inestimable jewel,” as Lincoln said of it), and their posterity because, being related by nationality if not blood, they were anxious that those who came after might also enjoy freedom’s benefits.

Now we are battling a new enemy, terrorists who hate us, and, in sermons and homilies, we are enjoined not to hate them in return. I doubt that many of us can do that. What we can do, and must do, is to continue to be what it is that causes them to hate us: a country with free markets, free speech, and, especially in this context, freedom of conscience.

That is what I believe Americans have in their minds as they wave the flag and shout, “USA, USA, USA.”