

Letter From Illinois

by John Kilgore

Flag Country



I live in flag country. Here in east-central Illinois, amid the corn and soybean fields, the whistle-stop towns on their grid of well-maintained blacktops, the Stars and Stripes are as common as blue jeans. The banner flutters from angled rods on the pillars of wraparound porches, flies from big poles in front of white two-story farmhouses. On the Fourth and Veteran's Day, it multiplies like dandelions around the old squares and along the parade routes. Driving up Illinois 130 to Champaign, my wife and I pass a barn whose owner sometimes displays an Old Glory two stories tall. We always wonder where he could have gotten such a thing.

If your needs are more modest, however, you can buy flags at Rural King or Wal-Mart or truck plazas over on the interstate. You can buy flag license plates, flag jackets, flag backpacks, or packages of miniature flags on toothpicks for your kid's birthday cake. Pickups sport flag decals in the back windows, right beneath the gunracks, leaving space on the bumper for more explicit slogans: "God, Guns, and Guts Built America—Let's Keep All Three." More often than you might expect, you drive past some old house and note *two* flags flying: Old Glory and the Confederate Battle Flag.

Somehow I never quite get it. As far back as the 50's, learning the Pledge as a first-grader in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I remember a sensation of uneasy puzzlement in regard to the flag. What did "indivisible" mean, and what did it have to do with that bit of colored cloth? If I was loyal to the country itself—"the Republic of Richard Stans," as, supposedly, a child once transcribed it—why should the flag matter? Wasn't the whole thing a little screwy? More than four decades later, the same questions still nag a bit. Driving past fields of glinting corn in an air-conditioned car, I appreciate my great good luck in being an American, but I still can't say quite how the flag fig-

ures into it. A flapping talisman, an idol we thank for blessings explicable on other grounds, it brings in an uncomfortable note of the primitive.

A paradox of flag country is that it makes so poor a microcosm of the thing signified—America, that "teeming nation of nations" sprawled across eight time zones. Here in Coles County, we are about 90 percent white, at least 95 percent Christian, 60 percent Republican. The terrain is regular as wallpaper, and I know people who have never crossed the Mississippi or the Appalachians. Dwellers on the coasts refer to us, unkindly, as "flyover country." So why, you wonder, should we feel so keen to affirm our solidarity with them? The paradox can grow sharper when you ask your patriotic neighbor who "loves America" how he feels about any *part* of it—whereupon he gives you an earful concerning those rich liberals in New York, those tree-hugging loonies in California, those racist Neanderthals down south. Only the larger construct, "America" as a mystic totality, is sacrosanct; everything smaller seems to be fair game for a little healthy slander.

Probably none of this is as strange as I am making it, however. Unity, in our robust American practice, is not the absence of discord but the very thing that makes discord possible. We Americans are like members of a big backwoods family, competing and quarreling day and night, but only until some outsider affronts one of us: Then we close ranks like a trained phalanx. It is *because* your brother is your brother that you can tell him he is dumber than mud, useless as tits on a bull. The flag serves as a wordless reminder of bottom-line loyalties, pulling together at least a few of the contradictions we live by. At sporting events, we sing to it *before* the combat starts, not after.

So if we in flyover country wave the colors more than our colleagues on the coasts, it is not from one-sided affection but a fairly sober intuition of our circumstances. On some level, we are like the kid in high school who always shouted the loudest at pep rallies, trying to enhance his individual status by the slightly paradoxical strategy of losing himself in the herd. Finally, though, and most of all, the flag is our license to be as different and disagreeable as we like. Dangling there at the corner of your porch, it fore-

stalls any ultimate misunderstandings, so you feel free to lean back, spit, and vent your true opinions about those fools in Washington or California. That flag really does make you feel free. No wonder you love it.

Draped as bunting near the lattice on a widow's porch, set low among the tombstones in a country cemetery, the flag can seem humble, reverent, submissive. And yet, of course, it is a badge of aggression, a flung glove, a line drawn in the dirt. The banner itself no longer features a coiled serpent with the legend "Don't tread on me," but the message is still there, and the most vivid icons of the cult are all martial, as in the national anthem and the Iwo Jima memorial. The gaudy colors suggest territorial display, like the bright plumage of male birds, and, on occasions like the Fourth, the display escalates to "threat behavior," with fireworks and military parades.

This fusion of opposite messages—hostility and amity, union and discord—corresponds to the familiar way that group membership splits the world up between friend and foe, insider and outsider. "Groupness"—that basic tendency to form up into cliques, teams, or clans that then compete for dominance—ranks among the strongest of human drives, deeply bred into the species during our evolutionary prehistory. Groups of every kind are glued together internally by mutual love and esteem, but only so they can project fierce competitiveness (and worse) toward rival groups. In such contexts, hate and love are really the most intimate of symbiotes, each requiring and fortifying the other; "team spirit" means loving your brother so the *two of you can efficiently bash* someone else. Small wonder that the flag, denoting group identity at a very fundamental level, should express an uneasy blend of opposite emotions. If its associated fantasies of combat seem weirdly prettified, the reason is that they have begun to warp into love messages, the violence expressing not its gritty self but the individual's sublime devotion to the country. If the prescribed expressions of that love ("God bless America!") seem a bit wooden, the reason may be that irrepressible competitiveness and aggression loom a bit too close for comfort. Still, it all hangs together, if only just: Contentment and resentment, love and hate, submis-

sion and testy pride all blend into that gummy, improbable, unfocused, but basically sincere emotion we call “patriotism.”

Nation-states, it has been said, are the natural children of war, pressed into existence by the exigencies of mass combat in the gunpowder era. Ersatz constructions, defensive alliances on a staggering scale, they lack intrinsic emotional resonance, given that our instincts are designed to function at the tribal level. But somehow, over the millennia, we have learned to displace the passion of groupness to progressively larger constructs—tribe, village, fiefdom, nation—until we can feel remarkably personal attachments to peoples unseen and regions unvisited. The flag seems to be a key piece of equipment we use to accomplish this marvel of psychic engineering. Rendering “country”—that unimaginably vast construct—at least somewhat immediate, it gathers the group emotion to itself, then redistributes it across the continent, like the IRS making wise use of your tax dollars. In the process, as an altogether lucky fringe benefit, it seems to give us a better grip on the dark side of the instinct. Waving the flag at imagined enemies, we can experience something like a wartime strengthening of group feeling without the great inconvenience of actual war. Saluting the flag, serenading it, marching it up and down Main Street while strings of Black Cat firecrackers explode behind the bushes—these look like civilized, immensely preferable alternatives to pogroms, lynchings, and war itself.

So, of course, no *actual* combat is in prospect in those well-kept parks where we gather on the Fourth, well after sundown, to swat mosquitoes and wait for the fireworks. The mood remains supremely peaceful, because all the hostility has been deflected toward an entirely theoretical enemy who—what luck!—never shows up, a ritual surprise that renders our mock mobilization a pure (if rather dull) celebration of brotherhood.

Still, it should not seem strange if the hand a first-grader holds over his heart as he recites the Pledge, believing himself the only one who doesn't quite understand, trembles a bit. Just beneath the surface of the ritual lurk bloody possibilities, palpable hints of all the bad things that can happen if your group loses or if (worse yet) you have no group.

Every year as the Fourth approaches, a country song by Lee Greenwood plays incessantly on the radio: “And I'm proud to be an American, / Where at least I know

I'm free; / And I won't forget the men who died / Who gave that right to me.”

No fan of country, I grit my teeth at the water-torture tempo, the tuneless tune, the hammering obviousness of the sentiment. But just as I reach for the SCAN button, that wonderfully strange “at least” arrests me. At least *what*, at least *why*? Right in the midst of his overflowing *amor patria*, the speaker seems to blurt an admission of shamefaced inferiority. Of course, patriotism likes to imagine itself on the defensive, and on one level we seem to be harking back (improbably enough) to an archaic sense of America as Europe's struggling younger brother. Given the twang in the speaker's voice, though, “at least” can suggest not his embattled state *qua* American, but *qua* Appalachian, Southerner, or grass-stem-chewing native of flyover country. And then, suddenly, he seems not to be celebrating America but to be complaining about his place in it, hinting at inequities and injuries even as he bravely affirms his devotion. A little masterstroke of passive aggression, “at least” lets him have it both ways, like my neighbor flying both Union and Confederate flags, identifying with both victor and vanquished.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to know who “the men who died” might be: The Revolutionary War seems too distant, and no other soldiers of American wars can be said with much plausibility to have given civil rights to the rest of us. But, of course, that is the point: The image of prettily dying men (*not* women) is as theoretical and *pro forma* as the nonspecific enemy who threatens on the Fourth. “I won't forget” means not that the speaker can tell you the dates of the battles (count on it), but that he, too, will fight if called. Feminists, I suspect, must feel that he is paying himself rather well for deeds as yet undone, subtly claiming warrior status in the act of paying homage.

None of this makes me appreciate “God Bless the U.S.A.” any better as music, but I begin to admire it as a shrewd little piece of social engineering, an honorable rendezvous with the least common denominator. Bad taste and a certain cluelessness may be part of the machinery of empire, necessary adjuncts of citizenship in anything as large and unlikely as America. The ugly American, that witless philistine who so baffles (and sometimes terrifies) our European cousins, may be just another mask of the competent Yankee. You do not cobble together an empire of eight time zones and countless ethnicities

by insisting on fine distinctions or indulging chancy departures from the official line. What you want, if you are the psychopolitical engineer assigned to the task, is a maximum of fervor, a minimum of substance. You want a flag—the flag—with its mysterious power to mobilize emotion on behalf of the unspecified. Not a slogan, not a program, but a mute physical thing, standing only for “America”—a place always yet to be discovered.

So it turns out that not getting it is getting it. When we stand at the beginning of a ball game to sing the anthem that commemorates a battle not one in a hundred of us can name, fought over issues we can't imagine, vagueness is the point, the whole essence of the ritual. To be pliant, vague, indeterminate, and a little confused, even as the putty of your indecision is about to harden into the flinty resolve that is the famous other side of the national character—this is the height of Americanism. Patriotism is being for whatever it is we are for, absolutely, before we are even for it. But it is also the obdurate fractiousness that—thank heavens—unsettles every consensus thus formed.

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Letter From London

by Andrei Navrozov

The Poet Player



Were the contemporary Paris audience of *The Gambler* to hear, as the curtain went down on Jean-François Regnard's minor comic masterpiece of 1696, that the apparently chance sequences of dice values in a game of hazard like backgammon can be shown to obey certain mathematical laws, which are knowable, they would have laughed more heartily than they ever laughed at a rogue's downfall. And yet the play was being performed nearly 50 years after Pascal, in reply to a backgammon player's query, had formulated the fundamentals of the theory of probability with an elegance still admired by Laplace in the 18th century, when the practical usefulness of this branch of mathematics was first appreciated.

Appreciated by some, yes; generally