

# Reverence for Referents

Bill Tusler of Appleton, Wisconsin used to fly the American flag in front of his house every day, but no more. Late on the eve of July Fourth, Bill and his wife Bev returned home from vacation to find the street in front of their house jammed with firetrucks. In their absence, the flag that had flown daily for the last three years from the awning of the Tusler home had been set afire, the blaze had spread from the flag to the awning and from there to the house, and only the timely response of an alert neighbor had kept the structure from going up in flames. Bill was lucky to have suffered damages of only \$3500.

The culprits responsible for igniting the flag are unknown and unlikely to be apprehended, but Bill suspects that they were merely rowdy teenagers caught up in the frenzy of flag-burning that distinguished this latest celebration of our nation's birth. "It all started with the hype on television," Bill surmises. Of course, Bill's hostility is directed primarily at the perpetrators — "I'd like to get my hands on those people," he says forthrightly — but one can't help assigning at least a portion of the blame to the persons responsible for turning the absurd gesture of a Communist kook (Gregory Lee Johnson) into a national competition pitting those who want to burn the flag (because they're not supposed to) against those who want to fly the flag (in the hope that they can catch someone trying to burn it and pommel him).

## Diversionsary Tactic

As usual, the media are suspect, for providing Johnson with the publicity-fix he craved, instead of ignoring the pathetic rebel. And then there are all those ninnies, justices included, who insist that flag-burning is protected by the First Amendment (try using the free speech argument the next time

you're fined for burning trash in your backyard). But the lion's share of the blame must rest with George Bush, who, both as a candidate and now as President, has made a habit of waving flags and reciting pledges whenever he wants to duck the heat from other "burning" issues.

The President's latest burst of heartfelt patriotism, his call for a constitutional amendment to prohibit flag-burning, served nicely to stifle outrage over his shamefully dispassionate response to the slaughter of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. Likewise, at the 1988 Republican Convention in New Orleans, Bush and his boys exploited the Pledge of Allegiance to plumb the depths of anti-Dukakis feeling, knowing full well that the stream of *pro*-Bush sentiment was an unnavigable one. Whatever the merits of righteous indignation over efforts — in Dukakis's Massachusetts and elsewhere — to curtail the recitation of the Pledge, the defiant note that was struck with each rendition at the Republican Convention, displacing the customary reverence, seemed in its way to be just a little disrespectful, too.

In Bush's mouth, the Pledge has become a gibe, like a taunt shouted at a rival football team; and the red, white, and blue have become gang "colors" — serving not to unify the diverse elements of our nation, but to distinguish "us" from "them," without encouraging too much thought as to who "we" and "they" are, or any recognition of the fact that the rascally leaders in both parties have long since abandoned their identity as Americans in favor of world citizenship.

## "For Which It Stands"

The American flag is a symbol, and its symbolic value is the only value it has. The Pledge of Allegiance tells us what it symbolizes, "*the Republic for which it stands.*" The flag itself has no intrinsic value. Thus, it is hard to take seriously

George Bush's, or any politician's, professed respect for this symbol when his every action seems to assault the thing that it symbolizes. How sincere are we to consider his allegiance "to the Republic for which it stands" when George Bush sashays across Eastern Europe dispensing charity to nations that enslave their own peoples, when he advocates business as usual with the Chinese leaders who are murdering their own people, and when he promotes domestic programs — in the name of fighting drugs, AIDS, and other alleged menaces — that will surely lead to the restriction of our own liberties?

Evidently what the President would have us do is revere a symbol detached from its referent. Don't worry about "the Republic for which it stands," he seems to be saying. "Just pledge allegiance to the *flag* and let it go at that." That kind of superficial patriotism will serve our would-be masters well when *our* flag begins to look more and more like someone else's flag. The conditioning has already begun: We've seen the crossed-flags pin that Jim Wright distributed in the name of peace, and the prototype of a U.S.-Soviet flag displayed at trade conventions. Will a constitutional amendment ostensibly passed to prohibit desecration of the American flag be used instead to prevent destruction of an emblem intended to supersede it? If the day comes when we are expected to pledge allegiance to a flag that symbolizes our oppression, the true act of patriotism will be to burn that flag.

In the meantime, wouldn't it be nice to go back to flying the flag because we *like* the flag, and because we cherish "the Republic for which it stands"? Bill Tusler says he may eventually erect a flagpole in his yard, at a safe distance from the house. But he has no intention of flying a flag from his new awning. "I don't want somebody coming by and lighting it again," he says. ■