



RANDALL ENOS

FLAGS PASSING BY

Whenever the American flag is unfurled I feel that I am a stranger instead of a citizen. I don't dislike the flag. I just feel that flagwavers and I live in separate countries.

Flags are everywhere. In public places, of course, but they bloom also from houses, offices, automobiles, stenciled on T-shirts and worn as lapel pins. These persistent and nagging proclamations of Americanhood, which might be reasonable though rude when in a foreign country seem discriminatory and shabbily neurotic here at home.

I am sure that most people who feel a compulsion to mark themselves with a flag believe in freedom and democracy for themselves and those they regard as like themselves, but I doubt they feel the same passion about the rights and liberties of others who practice a different religion (or none), or who have a different skin color or are recent immigrants.

The flag conceals more than it illuminates. Its red stripes represent the blood shed by the early patriots, who, if one needs to be reminded, were traitors. The stars are symbols of conquest, the brutal displacement of one civilization by another. Some of our citizens veil themselves with flags, merging self-perceived inadequacies with the civic inequities and empirical ambitions disguised by fervent nationalism. Underneath the patriotic bunting can be sensed the grim frenzy and unforgiving intolerance for new ideas and those who engage in them. The Pledge of Alliance to the Flag that children must say in public schools every day, which has contained the phrase "...one nation under God" for thirty years, is the national school prayer.

I do not participate in flag ceremonies or attend parades in which legions of flags are marched past me. For a few years I was obliged to salute the flag twice a day during its raising and lowering, and when I was at war for the flag I dreaded that it would swaddle my corpse if I was killed. When it became illegal to deface the flag I publicly burned one in anger that a piece of cloth, whatever its mythological imperative, was placed above human rights. I would not spit on the flag because I don't think a flag should be that important.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER