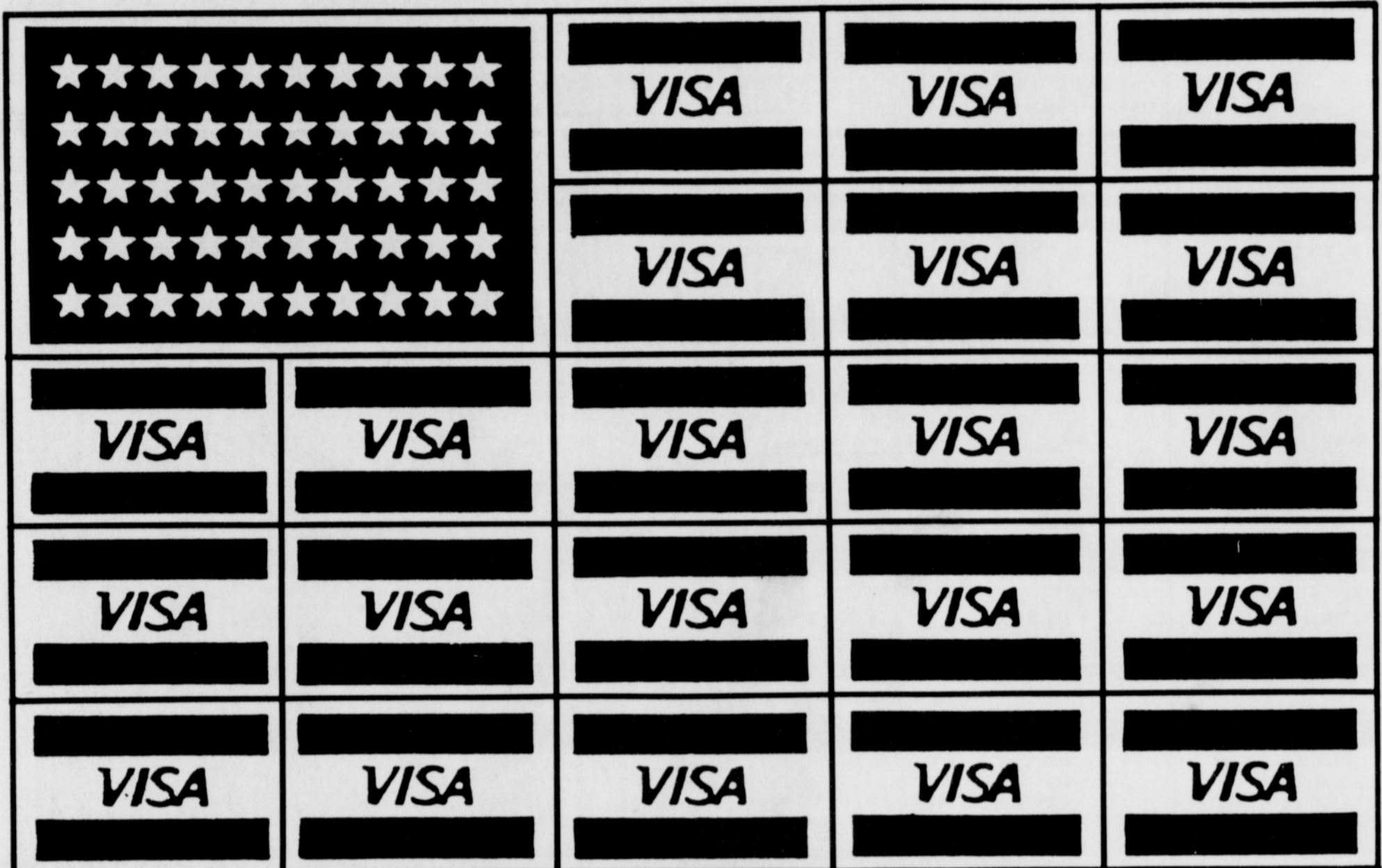




VOL 11 NO 4 50CENTS

NOVEMBER 1989



BURN THIS!

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundral." - Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

"With all due respect (to Dr. Johnson), I beg to submit that it is the first." - Ambrose Bierce (1842?-1914)

The bookburners don't want the Flag burned. Just when it seemed the nation was recovering from one of its periodic inFlagenza epidemics, carriers of the virus in Congress and the White House reinfect the population. The President, whom it is difficult to not refer to as Georgie Porgie, thinks he can cover his lack of anything to say by cutting a cloth of Stars and Stripes for a priestly gown. The inspired legislators on Capitol Hill commit their own form of Flagellation by passing a law prohibiting conFlagration while belatedly shuddering at the shadow of the Bill of Rights: they declined a constitutional amendment as too drastic, though some of them argued that the First Amendment only protects "expression," not the "conduct" of expression. That is like saying you have as many rights as you choose to have unless you use them, which immediately constitutes their abuse. But it's a topsy turvy world. The very people who demand obsequious obeisance to the Flag are busily trampling on the rights and freedoms for which it stands.

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.

The Flag conceals more than it illuminates. Its red stripes represent the blood shed by the early patriots, who, if one needs reminding, were traitors. The stars are symbols of conquest, the brutal displacement of one civiliza-

tion by another. Some 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 American children must say in public schools ever day, which for more than thirty years has included the phrase "one nation under God," is the national prayer. Wrapping God in the Flag is as inappropriate as claiming a nation under God. Worship of the Nation supplants God, and invoking a vanishing diety is almost begging forgiveness for transcending a spiritual all-father with sanctification of entirely human institutions - not quite ready to shed adolescence and throw off dependance on a fading parent.

The problem is that religious fervor is transferred to the secular nation. The Nazis'

favorite philosopher, Hegel, thought people should only be slaves to the state. The Flag, as the state's holy icon, must be sanctified and death to whoever sullies it - not death yet, but once denounced as a criminal act, defiling the Flag moves into similar realms of punishment and control.

Flag worship is a spiritual defect of the modern world, an abstraction that purports to represent some dim perception of tradition and purpose, manifested as it is now as a contradiction of its underlying assumptions of human worth and liberty. Congress echoes this confusion by crowding to bask in its blessed glow, signifying its collective incapacity to deal with what is real.

The country is falling apart. It is mortgaged to other nations and its assets are for sale to whoever has the cash or credit. The nation's industry is collapsed, much of it broken apart and sold off piecemeal to finance the corporate takeovers that gutted them. Poverty and homelessness cause and compete with the drug epidemic, ravaging the country's health and sanity. Domestic and foreign druglords corrupt police and politicians while their gangs terrorize neighborhoods like like feudal barons and gun each other down in our streets. In the meantime the outside world is changing around us bewilderingly fast - the democracy our leaders have long demanded of the Iron Curtain countries is suddenly occurring in Eastern Europe. The White House and Congress respond with paralysis and nostalgia for the certainties of the Cold War, preposterously claiming credit for winning it while dismantling as much of the Bill of Rights as they can get away with. These are the reasons the sanctity of the Flag has become such a burning issue.

- MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

