

# NORTH COAST

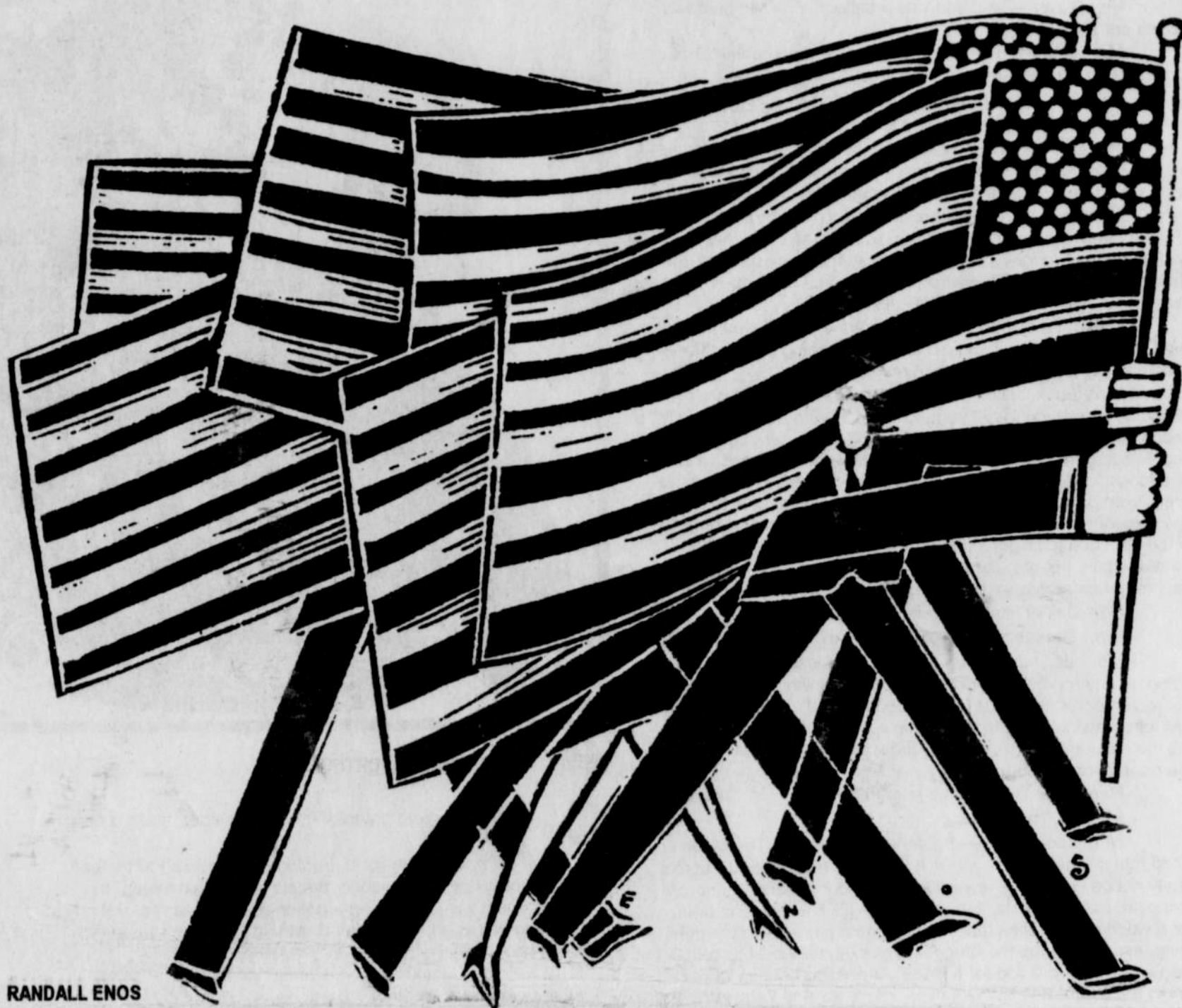


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*In a dark time the eye begins to see.*  
- Theodore Roethke

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RANDALL ENOS

## FLAGS PASSING BY

Whenever an 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 in a foreign country seem discriminatory and shabbily neurotic here at home.

I am sure that most people who feel a compulsion to mark their identity 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 every day in public schools (which contains the phrase, *One Nation under God*) is the national school prayer.

A flag is, after all, a tribal totem, relatively unsophisticated in an expanding global civilization in which such

iconoclastic relics of humanity's immaturity should be displayed only in museums.

Yet people still do get upset when someone trods upon a flag or blows a nose on its stars or stripes. Making shirts of flags or burning them in public protest gives police and some military veterans (not all) apoplexy. Patriots, poor confused souls who think their personal lives would improve if the USA dominated the earth, roar with anger and anguish because "desecrating" the flag is protected by the Constitution's guarantee of free speech and is in character with the precepts of democracy. A piece of cloth, whatever its mythological imperative, is not to be placed above human rights. What is freedom worth if in dissent against its loss its symbols cannot be dramatically abused?

Symbols are powerful. They define purpose, hold people together, but separate them also. Humanity is cross-breeding at an incredible rate; primitive icons of separateness are increasingly meaningless. Our species will truly be free when it is able to abandon the symbols that perpetuate its divisions. The many tribes no longer need their special banners and bunting except as family talismans put away for memory.

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. I would not spit on the flag because I don't think a flag is that important. Why should anyone care if someone burns a flag or makes love on one?

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER