

AND OUR FLAG WAS STILL THERE

BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER

"You can't win a war any more than you can win an earthquake."
~JEANNETTE RANKIN*

My daughter came home from kindergarten and announced, "Tomorrow we all have to wear red, white and blue."

"Why?" I asked, trying not to sound wary.

"For all the people that died when the airplanes hit the buildings."

I fear the sound of saber-rattling, dread that not just my taxes but even my children are being dragged to the cause of death in the wake of death. I asked quietly, "Why not wear black, then? Why the colors of the flag, what does that mean?"

"It means we're a country. Just all people together."

So we sent her to school in red, white and blue, because it felt to her like something she could do to help people who are hurting. And because my wise husband put a hand on my arm and said, "You can't let hateful people steal the flag from us."

He didn't mean terrorists, he meant Americans. Like the man in a city near us who went on a rampage crying, "I am an American" as he shot at foreign-born neighbors, killing a gentle Sikh man in a turban and terrifying every brown-skinned person I know. Or the talk-radio hosts who viciously bully a handful of members of Congress for airing sensible skepticism at a time when the White House was announcing preposterous things in apparent self-interest, such as the "revelation" that terrorists had aimed to hunt down Air Force One with a high-jacked commercial plane.

Rep. Barbara Lee cast the House's only vote against handing over virtually unlimited war powers to one man that a whole lot of us didn't vote for. As a consequence, so many red-blooded Americans have threatened to kill her, she has to have additional bodyguards.

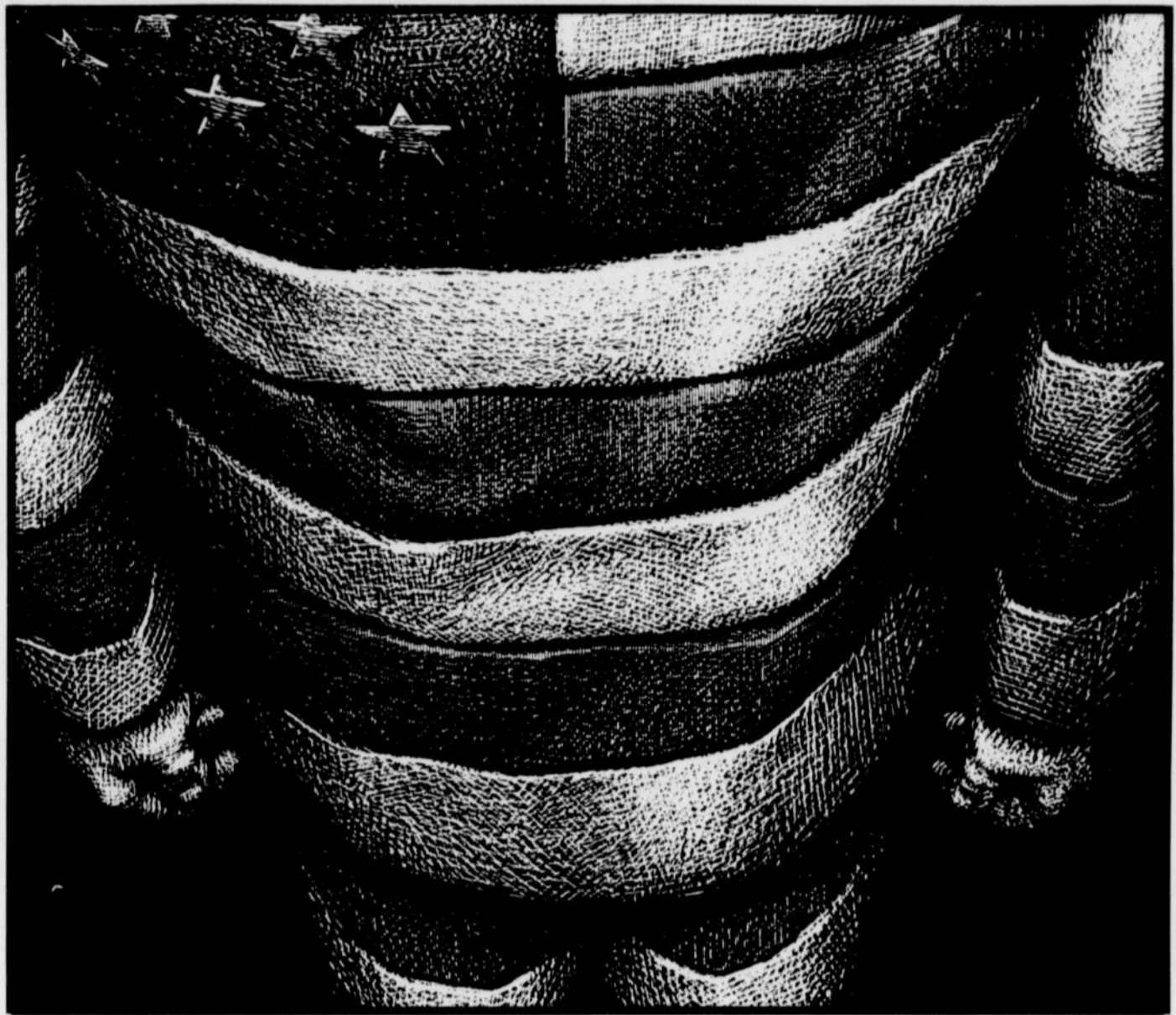
Patriotism seems to be falling to whoever claims it loudest, and we're left struggling to find a definition in a clamor of reaction. This is what I'm hearing: Patriotism opposes the lone representative of democracy who was brave enough to vote her conscience instead of following an angry mob. (Several others have confessed they wanted to vote the same way, but chickened out.) Patriotism threatens free speech with death. It is infuriated by thoughtful hesitation, constructive criticism of our leaders and pleas for peace. It despises people of foreign birth who've spent years learning our culture and contributing their talents to our economy. It has specifically blamed homosexuals, feminists and the American Civil Liberties Union. In other words, the American flag stands for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a shredder? Who are we calling terrorists here? Outsiders can destroy airplanes and buildings, but it is only we, the people, who have the power to demolish our own ideals.

It's a fact of our culture that the loudest mouths get the most airplay, and the loudmouths are saying now that in times of crisis it is treasonous to question our leaders. Nonsense. That kind of thinking let fascism grow out of the international depression of the 1930s. In critical times our leaders need most to be influenced by the moderating force of dissent. That is the basis of democracy, in sickness and in health, and especially when national choices are difficult, and bear grave consequences.

It occurs to me that my patriotic duty is to recapture my flag from the men now waving it in the name of jingoism and censorship. This isn't easy for me.

The last time I looked at a flag with unambiguous pride, I was 13. Right after that, Vietnam began teaching me lessons in ambiguity, and the lessons have kept coming. I've learned of things my government has done to the world that made me direly ashamed. I've been further alienated from my flag by people who waved it at me declaring I should love it or leave it.

I search my soul and find I cannot love killing for any reason. When I look at the flag I see it illuminated by the rocket's red glare. This is why the warmongers so easily gain the upper hand in the patriot game: Our nation was established with a fight for independence, so our iconography grew out of war. Our national anthem celebrates it; our language of patriotism is inseparable from a battle cry. Our every military campaign is still launched with phrases about men dying for freedoms we



HEATH HINEGARDNER

hold dear, even when this is impossible to square with reality. In the Persian Gulf War we rushed to the aid of Kuwait, a monarchy in which women enjoyed approximately the same rights as a 19th century slave. The values we fought for and won there are best understood, I think, by the oil companies. Meanwhile, a country of civilians was devastated, and remains destroyed.

Stating these realities does not violate the principles of liberty, equality, and freedom of speech; it exercises them, and by exercise we grow stronger. I would like to stand up for my flag and wave it over a few things I believe in, including but not limited to the protection of dissenting points of view. After 225 years, I vote to retire the rocket's red glare and the bullet wound as obsolete symbols of Old Glory. We desperately need a new iconography of patriotism. I propose we rip stripes of cloth from the uniforms of public servants who rescued the injured and panic-stricken, remaining at their post until it fell down on them. The red glare of candles held in vigils everywhere as peace-loving people pray for the bereaved, and plead for compassion and restraint. The blood donated to the Red Cross. The stars of film and theater and music who are using their influence to raise money for recovery. The small hands of schoolchildren collecting pennies, toothpaste, teddy bears, anything they think might help the kids who've lost their moms and dads.

My town, Tucson, Ariz., has become famous for a simple gesture in which some 8,000 people wearing red, white or blue T-shirts assembled themselves in the shape of a flag on a baseball field and had their photograph taken from above. That picture has begun to turn up everywhere but we saw it first on our newspaper's front page. Our family stood in silence for a minute looking at that photo of a human flag, trying to know what to make of it. Then my teenage daughter, who has a quick mind for numbers and a sensitive heart, did an interesting thing. She laid her hand over half of the picture, leaving visible more or less 3,000 people, and said, "That many are dead." We stared at what that looked like — all those innocent souls, multi-colored and packed into a conjoined destiny — and shuddered at the one simple truth behind all the noise, which is that so many beloved people have suddenly gone from us.

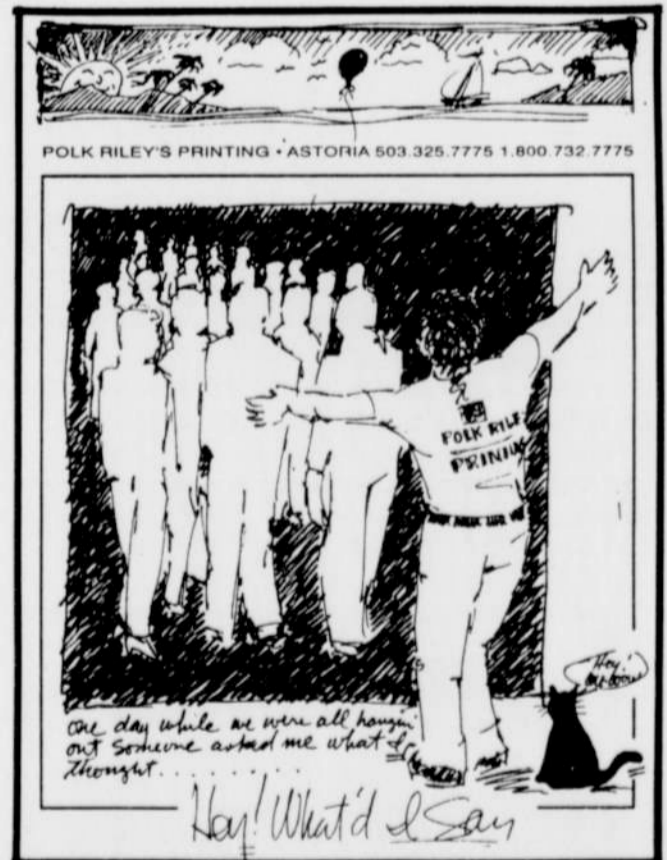
That is my flag, and that's what it means: We're all just people together.

Barbara Kingsolver is the author of nine books, including *The Poisonwood Bible*.

SEPTEMBER 11TH

Thunder in the wind.
No rain.
Peace mourns its passing.
No pain.
We are still human,
But our existence is bane.
Do we not bleed and die?
It is always the same refrain.
Nothing is right.
Terrorism shakes its ugly mane.
Are we not all human?
Do we not feel pain?
Peace comes to an end
As the old moon wanes.
Jets fly overhead,
We decide to take trains.
We are struck by horror.
We are struck by pain.
What do we do
When the time comes again?
Send our boys into battle,
Watch them die in vain.
Peace waves goodbye as
War says hello again.

~JESSI DUNKIN



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*Jeannette Rankin, Representative from Montana, was the only member of Congress to vote against U.S. entry into World War 2. She said she wanted to show that a "good democracy" does not always vote unanimously for war. (She also voted against the country's involvement in World War 1)

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