

The Flag: For Country or Self?



As many did after the 9/11 attacks, my husband, Dave, and I hung an American flag on our front door. We were proud and emotional in this show of solidarity and love of country. It was particularly meaningful as the flag had belonged to Anthony Sylvestro, Dave's father, a World War II veteran who'd been a radio operator on a B-24 Liberator.

All three Sylvestro brothers served during the war in Italy, the Pacific, and North Africa, and it is extraordinary to imagine the sacrifice of their parents, recent Italian immigrants, as their boys put their lives at risk for their new homeland.

Through our forefathers, Dave and I represent the melding of people who have sought and fought for America's promise of equality, justice, freedom, and opportunity. My ancestors arrived centuries ago, and my grandfather fought in World War I. Dave's father and uncles fought to uphold American ideals and stop the spread of Nazism.

While America has never lived up to the ideals professed in our Declaration of Independence and on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal, in a mystical way our flag has been a symbol of the country's aspirations to those ideals.

Now the flag that liberated concentration camps and gave hope to refugees fleeing oppression is brandished by those decrying the trampling of their freedoms when asked

to wear a mask to protect themselves, their loved ones and those around them.

If the veterans who saved us from Nazi rule were not dying of Covid-19, would they proclaim that yes, this particular freedom was what they fought for, given the resulting increased deaths of Americans? Given that this choice could lead to disease and a ventilator? Given that exercising this right could consign unwitting passers-by to the same?

What has become of those “who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life?” (From “America the Beautiful” by Katharine Lee Bates). How can people who demonstrate so little care for others’ well-being wave the flag and claim personal liberty as justification?

How can the president and those who support him take issue with so small a “sacrifice” as wearing a mask when it might save their countrymen a terrible death?

The freedom represented by the flag is not so trivial as license to do whatever you want. Freedom is a privilege and comes with responsibility to the greater good. November will prove our Declaration’s current status: Who are we now, America?