

The American Legion



For God and country

Suggested Speech

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Flag Day 2019

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The American Legion was still in its infancy when it convened a meeting in Washington, D.C., which still reverberates today.

In 1923, the four-year-old veterans organization called together 68 other patriotic, fraternal, civic and military groups for the purpose of drafting a code of flag etiquette. They were enormously successful.

President Warren G. Harding gave the opening address. "I hope you succeed in formulating a code that will be welcomed by all Americans and that every patriotic and educational society in the Republic will commit itself to the endorsement and observance and purpose of the code that you adopt here today," he said.

Legendary labor leader Samuel Gompers described how union workers felt about Old Glory. “To us,” he said, “the American flag means more than even its colors in themselves portray. It means the leadership of the democratic and humane struggle has been carried on throughout all the ages.”

Although violations of the Flag code do not carry criminal penalties, it is still the “go-to” source for all rules of etiquette regarding the display and care of the U.S. Flag.

The meaning and principles are far older than the United States, as American Legion National Commander Alvin Owsley alluded to in 1923.

“That piece of red, white and blue bunting means five thousand years of struggle upwards. It is the full-grown flower of ages of fighting for liberty. It is the century plant of human hope in bloom.”

That hope is what allows us to make important life choices. We choose to be office professionals, construction workers, union members, school teachers, police officers, business owners, doctors, pastors, students or members of some other trade.

Outcomes are not guaranteed but the freedom to try is quintessentially American. That freedom is what is symbolized by our American Flag.

It is what veterans have fought for and what many have died for.

The term “rally around the Flag” has been used so much that it has become almost a cliché. But the truth is that Americans feel closer and more attached to their flag during times of crisis.

In the years just prior to the attacks on 9/11, The American Legion averaged between a half-million to \$600,000 of flag sales at our national headquarters. In 2001, The American Legion doubled those sales. By the end of 2002, sales were triple of what they were pre-9/11.

The flag was just everywhere after 9/11. Who could forget the Pulitzer-prize winning photograph of three New York firefighters standing in the rubble that was the World Trade Center and hoisting our banner of hope and patriotism?

Just a few weeks later, a giant flag draped the side of the Pentagon – the outer walls still scorched from where the hijacked airliner penetrated the nucleus of America’s military might.

Debra Burlingame, an American patriot whose brother was killed in the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, wrote eloquently in The American Legion Magazine:

“The flag spoke for us when we were bereft of words. It was our comfort and our rallying cry: ‘America! America! God shed His grace on thee.’ And so we put them everywhere: on office buildings and storefronts, on cars and kids’ bikes. The flag was sewn anew onto the uniforms of Major League Baseball players and emergency room nurses. It greeted us and lifted our spirits when we needed it most, appearing in improbable places, like a highway overpass. That faded, dirty flag on I-95 pierces my heart. Where have all the flags of September 11th gone?”—end quote.

It is up to us to answer this question. We see the flag make the traditional comebacks – particularly during observances of Flag Day, Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and Veterans Day. We see our flag spike in popularity during Olympic games, political conventions and national sporting events.

The Flag becomes a symbol of national pride when an astronaut reaches the heavens and places it on the moon, or a group of common men show uncommon valor as they fight through the ravages of hell to raise it on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi.

But if only most Americans would pay as much attention to the Colors as we do our smart phones. It's also worth mentioning that the technology making those phones possible was largely developed in the land of the free.

Another rallying anthem for many in the military during the Global War on Terrorism was the Toby Keith song, "Courtesy of the Red, White & Blue."

Interestingly enough, the Continental Congress left no record as to why it chose the colors that it did for our flag. The Congress of Confederation in 1782, chose the same colors for the Great Seal of the United States and reasoned that the white meant purity and innocence; the red meant valor and hardiness and the blue was for vigilance perseverance and justice. George Washington reportedly explained that the stars on the Flag were taken from the sky, the red from the British colors and the white stripes signified the secession from the home country.

And how did the Flag earn the nickname “Old Glory?” It reportedly dates back to 1831 when Captain William Driver, a shipmaster from Salem, Massachusetts, left one of his many world voyages. Friends presented him with a flag of 24 stars. As the banner opened to a steady breeze, he exclaimed, “Old Glory!” He kept his flag for many years, protecting it during the Civil War until it was flown over the Tennessee capital.

Today, we are honoring not just our Flag, but also what it symbolizes. We are honoring freedom. We are honoring the freedom to worship as we please, to speak as we please and to vote as we please. We are honoring the hardworking men and women who have made this the greatest and most successful country that the world has ever known.

Flag Day is America’s Day.

It represents the more than 46 million men and women who have served in this nation's wars from the Revolution to the War on Terrorism. It represents liberation from tyranny, slavery, fascism, terrorism and communism.

It represents the rural countryside, the concrete city and the beautiful coastal shore. It represents the middle class, a class that was created because the GI Bill allowed millions to achieve the American Dream. It represents white Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and every ethnicity in which its sons and daughters earn the proud title "American Citizen."

Simply put, the Flag represents us. We owe it to our children – born and yet-to-be born – to continue to fly it high and proud.

Thank you for being here. God Bless you all and God bless the Flag of the United States of America!

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