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Protecting Our Grand Old Flag

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Protecting Our Grand Old Flag

BY Jo Ann Emerson

Every June 14th, Flag Day passes without much fanfare. There is no three-day weekend, no fireworks, and no parade down Main Street. But Flag Day must be one of the most important, if overlooked, celebrations of the year. More than 20 years have passed since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that the desecration of the American flag is protected speech under the First Amendment. That decision overruled laws protecting the flag in 48 states and the District of Columbia. Almost immediately after the ruling, landslide votes in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate affirmed the Flag Protection Act, which was again struck down by the Supreme Court.

The most fitting way to resolve the impasse over whether we should protect our flag is to take up a constitutional amendment. With approval by the Congress, the President and states, an amendment would impress on our nation's rule of law the sanctity of the American flag. I've authored legislation in Congress to accomplish this goal. Others will argue against an amendment on free speech grounds, but I don't think they realize how hurtful an action it is to desecrate the American flag. Throughout our Southern Missouri communities, we have veterans' organizations, service groups and educational programs which open and close their meetings with a salute to our flag and the Pledge of Allegiance. It's how each day begins in the House of Representatives. I've never been to a baseball game without pausing for a moment of quiet reflection on the greatness of our nation and our promise to keep her free.

Generations of Americans have fought and died under the banner of our country, and our servicemembers risk life and limb with the flag emblazoned on the sleeve of their uniform. No court, no public building, no classroom is complete without our flag. Aside from the many locations where you see the American flag and its many uses in our civic life, the meaning of our national banner cannot be understated. For those who served in uniform, the flag represents the nation for which they made untold sacrifices. Their compatriots who fell on the field of battle were wrapped in the flag at their funerals back home.

The field of stars on our flag represents the union of the 50 states, and each stripe harkens us back to the Founders and their colonies – united in a dream of freedom. Some say our flag can be desecrated because it represents the very freedom to burn the flag. But this argument is too misguided for me and for the vast majority of Americans. If we destroy the symbols of our freedoms, we are also destroying our freedoms.

No political statement is worth insulting the tradition of liberty upon which our American enterprise is founded. We are free because we choose to be free, and if we value our freedom we will be sure our flag endures.

Every state and most of our elected officials would agree with that premise and affirm the need to protect our American flag. With my legislation, I am giving them a chance to give our flag the same comfort and security we Americans enjoy as free people endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights.

Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, represents the Eighth Congressional District of Missouri in the United States House of Representatives.

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