

Claiming (and Reclaiming) America's National Symbols

By Angela Valentin-Foucault

We live in an age when claims of patriotism are used as political cudgels. Formerly non-partisan events, national symbols, and historical narratives are being weaponized. How can we break the cycle?



In a recent twitter exchange, my 21CAR.org colleague Zeb Webber criticized the appropriation of national symbols for partisan (even hateful) political ends, but also warned moderates against ceding symbols to extremists.

Zeb was reacting to Nike's recall of a July 4 commemorative sneaker that featured the "Betsy Ross" American flag (stars arranged in a circle on the field of blue) after football player and Nike spokesperson Colin Kaepernick objected. Press reports did not make clear whether Kaepernick believed the Betsy Ross flag is tainted by its creation in an 18th century America that featured slavery and other oppressions or because the alt-right has embraced it in this century.

Whatever the case, Kaepernick's conservative detractors were quick to pounce on what they portrayed as anti-Americanism and "political correctness" gone mad.



Two weeks after the Nike tempest, social media featured purported liberal outrage when actor Chris Pratt was photographed wearing a t-shirt featuring a version of the Gadsden Flag (another Revolutionary War-era flag, featuring a snake and the words "Don't Tread on Me"). In recent years, various versions of the Gadsden Flag have been used in ways ranging from appropriate to innocuous to political to hateful, on everything from vanity license plates to Tea Party posters to a [violent threat against police officers](#).

In our current hyper-partisan political environment, competitive victimhood is substantially irresolvable – not least because each party can provoke the other into reacting in ways that repel key voting blocs. How then should responsible Americans behave? Here are some questions we should ask ourselves.



Do historic national symbols represent one moment in American history or all of it?

At 21CAR.org, national symbols are a preoccupation. We've modeled our group on America's Independence-era leaders, our logo includes a portion of the American flag, and our homepage banner is the famous [John Trumbull painting](#) of the presentation of the Declaration of Independence.

We are cognizant of the flaws of individual Founders and the widespread oppression of the late 18th century. (To say the obvious, there is no one in Trumbull's painting who looks like me.) Yet we celebrate the creation of a government that was democratically advanced for its time and that has facilitated subsequent expansion of American rights and freedoms.

And we recognize the vast majority of Americans believe historic national symbols (including commemorative art like Trumbull's) represent America's noble achievements, not shameful errors.



How should we react to partisan or extremist use of national symbols, and what about "heritage" commemorations that are hateful in intent and effect?

I'll admit to strong but conflicting emotions.

President Trump's hijacking of Washington's annual 4th of July fireworks celebration broke yet another democratic norm and deployed federal government assets for partisan purposes. He has committed a long list of democratic transgressions, however, and July 4th was far from the worst. I found it shameful and annoying, but at the time, I also worried that protests, particularly if they turned violent, would be used to smear Trump critics more broadly.

Second, I think it outrageous that far right groups promiscuously deploy national symbols to provide cover for their hateful ideologies (and that moderates consistently underestimate the effectiveness of such nationalist white-washing). And I am horrified by the symbolic embrace of the Confederacy, from [war statues](#) to [rebel flags](#) to Tennessee's annual "[Nathan Bedford Forrest Day](#)."

But if I knew a political backlash to the removal of statues would jeopardize efforts to remove Trump, I would prioritize the fight against the current threat, not the historical one. America will be a better country when the "Lost Cause" resonates no more. There are ways to draw the poison in a principled, non-polemical manner (e.g., [Mitch Landrieu's example](#)). But through slightly clenched teeth, I say we prioritize the racist in the White House rather than bronze racists on horseback.



How should we think about protest that uses national symbols to “shock the conscience?”

The left more commonly challenges or reinterprets American symbology. [Flag burning](#) to protest the Vietnam War; the raised, gloved fists of [Tommie Smith and John Carlos](#) at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968; perhaps the “[Iron Eyes Cody](#)” anti-pollution advertisement of the 1970s – these were meant to antagonize or shame or sadden the audience.

There is sharp disagreement about the political efficacy of the first two actions but more universal praise for the third. Are those judgments merited? Proponents argue that raising the visibility of moral arguments is worth offending some viewers, and the only way to change entrenched views is to shock people out of complacency. Critics cite the risk of inadvertently hardening attitudes and suggest commonality works better than alienation.

Personally, I understand the frustration, and think there are times when protests are appropriate. On the other hand, I fear that, in 2019, any leftist who burns an American flag to protest Trump is doing him a favor and the rest of us a disservice.



How can we tell the story of America in a way that doesn’t isolate, but unifies, Americans?

Colonial Williamsburg has always been an ostentatiously patriotic place, featuring reenactors playing Founding Fathers, fife-and-drum parades performed in Revolutionary-era uniforms, and lots of American flags.

Over the last couple decades, Colonial Williamsburg has made an effort to provide more content on the lives of [early African Americans, enslaved and free, and native Americans](#). It still does a great job chronicling the lives of those who held predominant political, economic, religious, and social influence at the end of the 18th century, but it places them in a broader social context (in a facility that is self-guided, so visitors have a choice about what issues/people to focus on).

Another example of a “more is more” approach to American history is recent portrayals of the American space program. Earlier this month, Washington, D.C. hosted a multimedia commemoration of the Apollo Program, with images projected on the Washington Monument and broadcast to screens on the National Mall, including photos of a diverse set of Americans working at NASA.

It included photos of the African-American women “[Human Computers](#)” portrayed in the movie “[Hidden Figures](#).” That movie also had a deft touch, not seeking to overthrow the mainstream narrative of early space flight, but broadening our understanding of the contributions of people who did not initially get the attention they merited.



How can we overcome sterile disputes over the “real meaning” of American national symbols?

After Trump embraced and caressed an American flag at a [March NRA conference](#), supporters who might have attacked a Democrat who did the same thing (for violating at least the spirit of the [U.S. flag code](#)) bragged about Trump's overflowing patriotism. Democrats had few response options. (Complaints about flag embracing risked sounding petulant and if any Democratic candidates had been inclined to also hug a flagpole, he or she might have been accused of political plagiarism.)

While America's far-right physically embraces national symbols but philosophically embraces foul policies and rhetoric that America's Founders would have feared and hated, it sometimes seems the left is too wary of demonstrations of patriotism, even those consistent with liberal values.

America doesn't need a bloody competition of patriotic fervor, but the country would be in better shape if Americans on both sides refrained from claiming exclusive ownership of patriotism themselves and challenged others making claims of unilateral national virtue.



How can a smart embrace of national symbols foster consensus, not conflict?

Proponents of changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day point out Columbus didn't mean to "discover" the Americas, wasn't the first European to arrive here, was terribly cruel to native peoples, and wasn't even American. But Columbus Day was created as a celebration of Italian-Americans, who had suffered from discrimination upon arrival in America. Changing a celebration of one ethnic community to another doesn't seem like a win/win compromise. Maybe a hybrid holiday ("Meeting of the Hemispheres"?) would mitigate social fracturing.

Without commenting on the merits of Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem to protest police brutality, especially against people of color (even within our small group, there are divergent opinions on its appropriateness and utility), one beneficial outcome of the attention it received could be [greater NFL involvement](#) in encouraging less confrontational police/community relations.



A Suggestion

Those who deploy national symbols without historical context and those who seek to contextualize every symbolic reference are both misguided. Patriotism, wielded appropriately, can promote solidarity and pride. The correct response of a patriotic American told, "American symbols are hateful!" is "No, not unless they are mis-used." And the correct response of a patriotic American told, "You don't love this country!" is "Yes, I do." Full stop.