

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Remembering the True Spirit of '76

THE FOUNDERS of our nation whose work we commemorate today were not timid men. They were concerned not with the symbols of freedom but with its reality. They did not shrink from vigorous opposition to a government they believed to be unjust. They were not fearful of vigorous dissent; what they feared most was its absence and suppression.

We all remember the words of the Declaration of Independence about how "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." We are less inclined to recall that right after that, the Founders also declared that "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter and abolish it, and to institute a new Government. . . ." Looking back at the Founders as finely dressed planters and merchants in powdered wigs, which many of them were, and as less than perfectly consistent in their application of the principles of liberty, which was also true of many of them, it is easy to forget how radical for its time was the idea that they were offering the world—and how radical in many ways it still is for ours.

Their views were scandalous to much of respectable opinion. The depth of their zeal for personal liberty led them to believe that no government, even one's own, was worth supporting if it abandoned its commitment to freedom. The United States' is thus one of the few governments in the world whose founding document asserts the right of the people to overthrow it.

It is a staggering and saddening leap from this boldness to the faintheartedness of last week's vote in the House of Representatives for a

constitutional amendment to allow Congress and the states to outlaw the "physical desecration" of the American flag. What may be most remarkable about this amendment is that it is not about anything happening now. Before this past weekend, at least, there was exactly one reported flag burning in all of 1995.

This is more a settling of scores, a revenge against the 1960s and, of course, a cheap way for a member of Congress to vaunt his or her patriotism. But to disfigure the First Amendment with this exception is only to give in to the spirit of the flag burners, to declare in retrospect and for the future that their actions are somehow so important that an entire society is willing to restrict its fundamental liberties just to make a statement about them. This is to puff up those whose actions are best ignored and forgotten.

"Our very refusal to take action to protect the American flag clearly reduces its symbolic value," declared Senate Judiciary Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah). But nobody's actions, not those of Congress or of the flag burners, reduce the value of the American flag. That was established 219 years ago when a group of very brave men conceived a nation in liberty, and it has been refreshed since by courageous men and women who fought under its colors for freedom and struggled at home to expand freedom's writ to encompass all Americans.

Surely today's generation of Americans should resist allowing a concern for the "symbolic value" of the flag to triumph over a genuine reverence for the cause to which our revolutionary forebears pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. It is in memory of them, and on behalf of their cause, that Americans today will proudly wave the Stars and Stripes.