



A Reminder to Future Americans

—Mary McGrory

IN A SEASON when so many great wrongs are being righted, I hope it won't sound greedy to ask for one small blessing.

Could we now outlaw the American flag lapel-pin?

I realize I am on shaky legal ground since the Supreme court decision of last March, which ruled that the wearing of a flag-patch on the seat of blue jeans is not a crime.

The flag-pin vogue was originated by our resigned President. I believe that it was on in its way as serious and willful a desecration as sitting on the star-spangled banner. Surely the intent in both cases was the same, namely, to set the beholder's teeth on edge.

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THE FLAG on the posterior was supposed to tell middle Americans what some young people thought of a country that waged the Vietnam War for 10 years. The flag on the lapel was meant to say that some Americans are more American than others, specifically more so than those who declined to endorse the burning and bombing of peasant villages in Asia.

The former President began wearing the flag about the time the war protesters began to mass against him. The suggestion was that he was not only its custodian, but its embodiment. His men took up the fashion as a mark of their superior patriotism and their iron loyalty to him.

The ugly and bitter custody fight reached its climax on July 4, 1971, when the White House staged a grotesque event called "Honor America Day."

Jeb Stuart Magruder, an ex-flag wearer, in his book explains that the occasion was hard to describe. "To us, it was a political event, one in which honoring America was closely intertwined with supporting Richard Nixon and particular with his policy in Vietnam . . ."

But that's all over now. The House Judiciary Committee debate on impeachment persuaded millions of Americans that democratic government is alive and well. Their conclusion: the No. 1 flag-wearer had been desecrating the Constitution.

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IT IS TOO LATE for the flag-pin wearers, who almost turned the United States into a third-class country, to follow the example of the Vietnam veterans against the war. In 1971 they held a terrible ceremony to repudiate their services to the government. They hurled their medals into a crude pen constructed on the steps of the Capitol. The former President's men are scattered now and defamed in a variety of elsewheres, from which they cannot venture without armed escort.

Maybe they could send their souvenirs to some central collection point. Possibly the Smithsonian Institution would put them on display to remind future Americans that when the flag is worn — instead of being flown — the Constitution is probably in danger.

It was a very near thing, as we know now. As James Mann of South Carolina remarked during the hearings, "Next time, there may be no watchmen in the night."