

Flag on the 4th: Reactions to It Vary

By JON NORDHEIMER

"I wouldn't fly the flag on the Fourth of July or any other day," said Jackie Robinson, the former baseball star. "When I see a car with a flag pasted on it I figure the guy behind the wheel isn't my friend."

DeWitt Wallace, board chairman of Reader's Digest, which recently initiated a show the colors campaign, takes an entirely different view.

"The display of the flag is one way to show that we know what a privilege it is to be an American," he said. "Don't you get a thrill when you see the flag flying outside a post office, a factory or an office building? I do."

The two opposing views reflect two current trends: Americans are buying and displaying the flag in record numbers this year. But Mr. Robinson, now board chair-

man of the Freedom National Bank in Harlem, and liberals like him are increasingly avoiding the flag as a symbol of the Far Right.

Fifty million plastic flag decals have blossomed on cars, storefronts and home doorways, and manufacturers of cloth flags report that sales are soaring, in what some call a revival of "old-fashioned patriotism."

Longtime Flagwavers

Many who display flags have done so for years, long before it came to be regarded by some as an ideological banner. And the rising use of the flag and flag decals is reflected among nearly all elements of the population, not just among those Americans whose politics are right-wing or conservative.

However, to Mr. Robinson and others who think like he does, displaying the flag has become a manifestation

of opposition to the social progress of minority groups or to all-out support for the war in Vietnam.

His view that the flag has become the "captive" of reactionary factions was shared, in part, by Charles Morgan, Southern director for the American Civil Liberties Union in Atlanta.

Mr. Morgan recalled a remark made by a young black civil rights worker in the South recently: "Find the city that flies the most flags and you've found the city where we have the most trouble."

Mr. Wallace, however, said he was "amazed" that anyone could attach political significance to the new interest in the American flag. His magazine is generally credited with creating the boom in flag decals by sending 18 million free ones to subscribers.

A leading flag manufacturer said he traced the origin of the trend directly to the public's concern over "internal upheaval."

"People in this country are tired; they want to get back to basics, to honesty, to the stars and stripes. They want to get away from riot in the ghetto and civil strife," said Charles Williams, head of A.B.C. School Supply of Atlanta, where flag sales have increased by one-third this year.

Flag With 51 Stars?

The controversy over the flag even extends as far as the moon.

Representative Richard L. Roudebush, Republican of Indiana, recently succeeded in attaching an amendment to the space agency's authorization bill that would prohibit the crew of Apollo 11 from planting any flag other than

the American flag on the lunar surface.

Mr. Roudebush said that his stipulation was fathered by national pride, not territorial claims, although the conservative weekly magazine, National Review, commented wryly that the American moon flag should contain 51 stars.

"When I fly the flag," explained Mr. Roudebush, a former national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, "I'm demonstrating my 100 per cent allegiance to nationalistic feelings. There's been an effort by forces to downplay nationalism and substitute a philosophy of a world community of nations. Our flag is a symbol of the greatest nation in the world, which has given more material things to its people than any other nation."

One Representative who voted against Mr. Roudebush's amendment was Jonathan Bingham, Democrat of the Bronx, who called the legislation "chauvinistic and unduly nationalistic."

"I am particularly angered by the right-wing attempt to take over the flag as its personal property—it belongs to all of us," said Mr. Bingham, a direct descendant of a founder of the Pilgrim colony.

The Flag and Policemen

Another factor contributing to apprehension regarding the flag has been the trend of policemen to display flag decals on patrol cars in areas of racial tension.

"In this context," remarked a black civil rights worker recently, "the flag becomes the banner of the powerful white establishment."

However, Mayor Ronnie Thompson, of Macon, Ga., who ordered that American flag shoulder patches become part of the official police uniforms in that city last autumn, said his innovation had improved black-white relations.

"Since we started using

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the shoulder patches, not a single police officer has been assaulted in the line of duty, and it has also led the officers to do a better job," the 34-year-old Mayor said.

He said the reason behind the improved relations was a latent sense of patriotism that "all Americans have and recognition that the policeman and his shield are direct representatives of the flag."

Mr. Thompson, since entering office in late 1967, has also ordered that the flag outside City Hall be flown at half-staff in honor of United States soldiers killed in Vietnam. Every morning and evening, when the flag is raised and lowered a fire department honor guard attends the ceremony and for two and a half minutes all traffic in the vicinity is halted, he explained.

In Birmingham, Ala., civic clubs, acting under guidance from City Hall, put out "avenues of flags" on unofficial flag holidays, placing American flags 50 feet apart for two miles or several streets.

The Mayor of Birmingham, George Seibels, is a Republican, as is Mr. Thompson of Macon. Also like Mr. Thompson, Mayor Seibels said the American flag was a symbol of law and order.

"Let us who respect the law and love our nation stand united in opposition to those who would through violence and destruction tear asunder this government," he said in a recent interview.

Mr. Morgan, of the A.C.L.U., pointed out an un-

stated irony in these remarks by Southern Mayors. He recalled that just six years ago, when United States marshals flooded into the Deep South to enforce integration laws, it was the Negro who flew the American flag while the white supremacist rallied under the Confederate battle flag.

The fact that most of the flag decals seen today were distributed free of charge by magazines, filling stations and other business concerns and did not require the initiative of the individual receiving them suggests that their popularity cannot be explained entirely as the product of political orthodoxy.

The decals provided by Reader's Digest and Gulf Oil contain a picture of a flag only, unaccompanied by any slogan. However, a decal that has been in circulation for a longer period is an American flag with the message: "The Flag—Love It or Leave."

About one million of the latter have been distributed by the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks to its membership.

William J. Windecker, of Orange, N. J., chairman of the Elks's Americanism committee, said the idea for the decal had been suggested by a member in Miami who wanted the message aimed at Cuban refugees.

"We had a few resisters about the slogan, who thought it was too rough, and we had no right to tell people about this, but we figured the opposition would die out like a moth in a flame," said Mr.

Windecker, a retired personnel manager.

"There is so much confusion in the country today with antagonistic groups trying to overthrow the Government it's time we stand up and be counted," he went on.

While the decal phenomenon has stolen the spotlight, there has been a great surge in sales of standard fabric flags. Norman Rifkees, vice president of Annin Company of Verona, N. J., the nation's largest manufacturer of flags, said no one factor could be cited for the increase. He personally attributed it jointly to Presidential campaign oratory, the Vietnam war and flag desecration by war protesters.

"Only one out of every 10 American households has a flag, so anything to stir patriotic emotions will be reflected in a jump in flag sales," Mr. Rifkees said.

"Flags are really for children to enjoy on an occasion like the Fourth of July," remarked Peter Stone, author of the Broadway hit "1776," a musical built around the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Would he fly the flag today?

"Probably not," the playwright answered. "The identification with right-wing causes would discourage me if I had a sudden compulsion to show the colors. Anyway, I can't find any reason normally to display it. I feel that I'm saying I'm proud to be an American when I maintain a decent state of citizenship."