

Star-Spangled Refuge

By Tom Wicker

"Patriotism," said Samuel Johnson a couple of centuries ago, "is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Today, it is usually the first refuge of politicians like New York City Councilman Matthew J. Troy, who is among the sponsors of a bill to require the playing of the national anthem at sporting events, despite his own doubts about the bill's constitutionality.

This minor outrage follows the vacillations of Madison Square Garden authorities, who first decided not to play "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a forthcoming track meet, then changed their minds under patriotic pressure. Finding this surrender not a sufficient guarantee of sporting New York's patriotism, Councilman Troy and others decided to make it mandatory, if unconstitutional, that the anthem should be played before boxing matches and other athletic displays of national greatness.

It is not at all surprising that Councilman Troy can elevate patriotic sentiment so easily above the Constitution that he—as a public official—might have been thought responsible for upholding. Symbols like the national anthem often reduce reasonable men to the most tearful banality or stir them to the most angry aggressions.

Up in peaceful Scituate, Mass., for instance, the town flag is being flown at half-mast for President Truman; now the selectmen have voted to keep it lowered until the town meeting in March, when anti-war protest proposals will be considered; and apparently, even this use of a town flag has profoundly upset some residents—even some who oppose the war.

Yet, there never has been much protest when the American flag was adapted for a lapel button or a bumper sticker by pro-war forces, or

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when Americans were asked to put out flags on a given day, not in support of peace but in support of war. There is something about the idea of war that seems to justify the use of the flag to support it; the literature of war is replete with waving banners, and of course it is "o'er the ramparts" that the American flag is glimpsed "gallantly streaming" in the national anthem.

Why does it make sense — if it does — to play the anthem, present the flag accompanied by armed color-bearers, and have fighter planes fly overhead before football games (professional spectacles dealing in millions of dollars for private gain) but not at plays, lectures, concerts and poetry readings? What is the correlation, if any, between patriotism and people battering one another in the boxing ring or in football games—or for that matter between patriotism and track meets, baseball games and other athletic events that are not so violent?

The explanation probably is that symbols like the flag and the anthem, appropriate as they are to the warlike spirit, are equally appropriate to sports events, with their displays of the instinct to combat and the will to win. Even the so-called "non-contact" sports exalt competition and the pursuit of victory, including the kind of individual heroism and team spirit that are evoked in wartime.

That is probably the answer, too, for the peculiar double standard that operates in the sports world to elevate patriotism over other commonly accepted virtues, such as honesty or the willingness to stand up for what one believes.

George Allen, the coach of the Washington Redskins, was fined within the pro football family, but continues coaching and is honored at the White House, after having traded away draft choices that he did not possess; in other circles, that would be regarded as fraud. It does more honor to sports that numerous athletes have quite properly been able to win high national awards despite past police records.

Yet Muhammad Ali was stripped of his heavyweight title for refusing draft induction. Two black athletes who did not show what someone considered proper respect for the patriotic proprieties at the Olympics last summer were barred from further competition; and last week at a track meet on Long Island a relay team from Eastern Michigan College was thrown out when one of its members took warm-up exercises during the playing of the anthem.

Thus, the warlike atmosphere of athletic events may well explain the warlike trappings with which both their promoters and their fans like to glorify them. But is this sufficient reason for New York City officially to mandate the playing of the national anthem just before two boxers begin to belt each other around the ring?

Such a mandate only tightens the link between war and sports, on the one hand, and patriotism on the other. Aside from their easily swallowed constitutional qualms, those who are supporting this cheap demagoguery would do well to remember De Maupassant's remark that patriotism is "the egg from which wars are hatched." Of course, he was basically un-American, since he was French.