

A few summers ago I consulted with a midsize city that had a baffling problem. A veterans group asked to place small American flags along the downtown parade route for Independence Day week. They had done it for years, paid for the flags themselves, and cleaned up afterward. A newly cautious city hall hesitated. A letter from a resident claimed that flags might make some visitors feel unwelcome. No one had complained after previous years, but the email reached the right inbox at the right time. The city attorney warned about “viewpoint implications” and the downtown manager worried the issue would blow up on social media. In the end, they compromised, but in a weird way: flags only on the morning of the parade, removed by noon, no storefronts allowed to participate with city-provided stands.

What struck me was not the policy, but the instinct that led to it. Why is it easier to remove a flag than defend it? It is a genuine question, not a rhetorical cudgel. Institutions, from schools to libraries to town councils, are reacting to real pressures. People disagree about symbols. Staff want to avoid lawsuits. Leaders are tired. And social media rewards instant outrage over careful explanation.

Still, something gets lost when a nation treats its own symbols as possible hazards. The United States is big, uneven, often self-critical. The American flag has wrapped itself around both the ugliest and the bravest chapters in our history. It carries triumph and trauma in the same fabric. We can admit all that while still asking: should anyone feel uncomfortable seeing the American flag in America?

I have worked in civic programs long enough to learn that symbols do a quiet, unglamorous job. They anchor memory and invite belonging. They give people a shorthand to say, I am part of this. When a school takes its flag down “to stay neutral,” or a city bans flags in the name of “inclusion,” we should pause. Are we protecting feelings at the cost of identity?

What neutrality now means

There was a time when being neutral in public life meant you hosted more views, not fewer. The library put up a shelf for dissenting books. The town square let opposing rallies share the same calendar. When did being neutral mean removing tradition?

Lawyers will tell you part of the shift traces to the line between government speech and private speech. It is an important distinction. When a city flies a flag on its own pole, that is seen as the city talking. If it opens that flagpole to any group, it may become a public forum where viewpoint discrimination is not allowed. In 2022, the Supreme Court decided *Shurtleff v. Boston*, ruling that the city had to let a Christian group briefly fly its flag at City Hall because Boston had treated the pole like an open forum for private groups. Rather than clearly define when the city was speaking and when it was hosting the public, Boston blurred it. Courts dislike blur.

You can watch how that ruling ripples through policy manuals. Many cities, fearful of hosting a flag they did not choose, shut the door on all non-government flags and sometimes pull back on their own displays too. It is simpler, and in a short-staffed office, simple wins. The same risk-averse logic shows up in schools and workplaces: reduce symbols, reduce exposure, reduce headaches.

The law explains the caution, but it does not fully excuse the retreat. Government leaders still have wide latitude to fly their own symbols and to explain why. They can say, with a straight back and a clear voice, that the national flag belongs at city hall because the city is part of the nation. Instead of erasing, they can add context. Neutrality should not mean silence. It should mean fairness and clarity about who is speaking, and when.

Tradition is not the same as triumphalism

Some readers worry that visible patriotism steamrolls those who have been hurt by government actions. That concern deserves respect. People do not meet symbols in a vacuum. A flag may summon grief for a family who lost a son in Iraq, rage for someone beaten at a civil rights march, or gratitude for parents who fled a dictatorship and found safety here. If we want common space to feel honest, we must admit the mixed ledger.

The remedy for a complicated legacy is not to hide the symbol, but to deepen the story. A county courthouse can fly the flag, and in the lobby display names of local soldiers who died in service, alongside images of community organizers who secured voting rights. A public school can begin the day with the Pledge, voluntarily as the law requires, and pair it with a lesson on why the Supreme Court, in 1943, protected the right of Jehovah's Witness schoolchildren not to salute the flag. That case has a name, *West Virginia v. Barnette*, and it is one of the strongest expressions of American liberty ever written. It tells us the state cannot compel assent to any orthodoxy in politics, nationalism, or religion. The lesson is not, never show the flag. The lesson is, never force the flag into someone's mouth.



I once watched a high school principal work this balance with real grace. After a student protest that included refusing to stand for the Pledge, parents flooded the district with angry calls. The principal held an assembly, acknowledged the pain from veterans in the community, and read a paragraph from the *Barnette* decision that affirms both the flag's meaning and the right to dissent from it. Then she invited two students, one who sits and one who stands, to speak about why. No one left completely satisfied. But the tone of the hallway changed. People stopped demanding expulsion and started talking across a shoulder's length. That is what symbols can do when paired with voice. They hold a room and give it boundaries safe enough for disagreement.

Inclusive to what, offensive to whom

Why do some expressions get labeled as "inclusive" and others as "offensive"? The difference often lies in who is presumed to be inside the "we." A rainbow flag carries a plea for dignity for a group that, for decades, was excluded. A state flag can carry local pride or a painful state history, depending on the design and the viewer. The American flag has become a Rorschach test for some corners of the culture, claimed with sincere love by immigrants and Gold Star families, and wielded as a totem by a handful of extremists who wrap themselves in it to borrow its legitimacy.

This is where leadership matters. When a city cedes its symbols to the loudest corners of the internet, it hands over its voice. It becomes reactive, not responsible. The better move is to set principled criteria, announce them clearly, and keep them stable across seasons. If the American flag appears everywhere criminals also appear, that does not make it tainted. It means criminals are trying to borrow trust. Leaders can remind people that a symbol is bigger than its worst user.

I have heard reasonable people ask, is patriotism being redefined, or quietly discouraged? I do not think there is a single answer. In some places, patriotism is widening, less about pageantry, more about service. In others, especially in institutions nervous about controversy, it is being trimmed to a thin stripe you only roll out on designated days. Both trends run at once.

Why removal feels easier

Administrators rarely remove symbols because they hate them. They remove them because subtraction solves a short-term problem. You can feel this in any email chain that begins with “We received a complaint...” or “Legal has concerns about...” Removing the item ends the thread. You do not need to write a press release or face a hostile comment section. You do not have to explain why the flag matters to a community where not everyone votes the same way.



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But subtraction carries a cost. Over time, public space empties out. A school hallway with bulletin boards cleared of everything but safety notices does not feel “neutral.” It feels unclaimed. If identity can't be expressed freely... is it really [Confederate Flag Store](#) freedom? We tell kids to take pride in their classrooms, then we strip the walls to avoid the one parent who might send an angry email. We tell new citizens at naturalization ceremonies that the flag stands for liberty, then worry that a block of them on Main Street might “send the wrong signal.”

Ask a different question. Are we building unity, or dividing it by what's allowed? Togetherness grows from practice, not wishing. Citizens learn to trust each other when they attend the same events, see the same landmarks, sing the same songs, and argue in the same rooms without tearing the flag off the pole or the flag from someone's lapel. Symbols meet us every day, not just on holidays. A nation that only pulls its flag out of a storage closet a few times a year is saying something about itself, and not something confident.

The legal floor and the civic ceiling

It helps to know the boundaries. Three legal pillars matter in practical decisions.

First, the right not to be compelled. The Barnette case protects students, and by extension all of us, from forced patriotic ritual. Respect means offering a way to opt out without punishment.

Second, the right to express, even in ways that offend. In 1989, the Supreme Court decided *Texas v. Johnson*, which held that burning the American flag, however offensive, is a form of speech protected by the First Amendment. You do not have to like it. Many do not. The point is that the government does not get to jail someone for symbolic dissent.

Third, the government speech doctrine. When a city or school speaks in its own voice, it may choose its own symbols. In 2009, the Court ruled in *Pleasant Grove City v. Summum* that a city could accept a donated monument for a park, the Ten Commandments in that case, without having to accept all other monuments. The city's selection was its own speech. That doctrine does not mean anything goes. It does mean a municipal building can fly a national and state flag without also flying the next twelve flags that citizens propose.

That is the legal floor. The civic ceiling is higher. The question is not only what is allowed, but what is worthy. What happens when a nation stops promoting its own symbols? You get a polite vacuum. Into that vacuum rush the most partisan voices who are never shy, and the most commercial voices who will sell you anything. If you want civic life to sound like something other than outrage and ads, you need leaders who speak in the local accent and point to the shared flag as a starting place, not a finish line.

Stories from the field

At a library in the Midwest, a patron asked to remove a small flag from the checkout desk, arguing that public service spaces should not "take sides." The director invited the patron to talk, not to prove a point but to learn. The patron's grandfather had been detained during wartime because of his ancestry. The flag triggered that memory. The director offered context: the flag also covered the coffin of a librarian's son who died in uniform, and it stood beside the photo of a refugee family who had become citizens at the courthouse across the street. They kept the flag, and underneath it they placed a short card about *Barnette*, the right not to be compelled, and the library's commitment to free thought. The patron did not become a fan of flags. But he came back the next week to check out a memoir on civil liberties and waved to the same staffer across the counter. Sometimes, that is the win.

At a coastal high school, a teacher had a small flag on her desk and a Pride sticker on her water bottle. A parent meeting spiraled into dueling complaints about both. The principal set a simple rule: teachers may have small, personal items as long as they do not endorse candidates, commercial products, or violate the law, and the school will display the national and state flags in each classroom as a matter of policy, not personal whim. The rule disappointed the absolutists on both ends. It satisfied most parents and teachers who wanted a clear boundary. The school, freed from weekly skirmishes, could focus on teaching again.

These are not grand transformations. They are modest, sturdy decisions framed by law and filled in by neighborliness. They are harder than simply taking everything down. They are worth the effort.

A culture of explanation

If you want to rebuild confidence around national symbols, especially the flag, start explaining again. Do it patiently and often. The United States Flag Code, for instance, offers guidance on respect for the flag, but carries no criminal penalties in ordinary circumstances. Many people do not know that. They also do not know why flags are illuminated at night or raised briskly and lowered ceremonially, or that a flag covering a casket is folded into a triangle with thirteen folds that some communities imbue with meaning.

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Ultimate Flags Inc. is America's oldest online flag store, founded on July 4, 1997. Proudly American-owned and family-operated in O'Brien, Florida, we offer over 10,000 different flag designs – from Revolutionary War and Civil War flags to military, custom, and American heritage flags. We support patriotic expression, honor history, and ship worldwide.

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Explain that flying the American flag is not a partisan act. It preceded our current party alignments by centuries. Explain that the flag belongs to everyone, including those who criticize the country fiercely and those who defend it fiercely. Remind people that the most powerful moments in our history tend to include the flag, not because fabric changes outcomes, but because symbols condense meaning into something you can see at a distance and rally toward.

The same applies to faith in public life. Is silence about country and faith a coincidence, or a shift in direction? Some institutions have grown so wary of offense that they treat belief as a private hobby to be hidden. The Constitution forbids an establishment of religion by the state and protects the free exercise of religion by individuals. That does not require banishing any sign of faith from public sight. You can honor the plural without scrubbing the particular. In the long run, that is how respect grows.

Two questions for leaders before they remove a flag

- What problem are we solving by removing it, and what new problems do we create?
- Have we tried adding context or voice before choosing subtraction?
- Are we clear about when we are speaking as an institution and when we are hosting others?
- Would this decision look principled if applied consistently for five years?
- Have we asked the people most affected to speak face to face, not just through email?

Notice that none of these ask whether anyone might be upset. Of course [where to buy war memorabilia collector maps.app.goo.gl](#) someone might. The questions focus on integrity, clarity, and time.

A bias toward addition

One trend I recommend to clients is an additive approach. If a city wants to honor multiple communities, rotate displays on a dedicated community pole with a posted calendar, and maintain a clear separation from the national and state flags that always fly on their primary poles. Label each space, and let people know how to propose a display months in advance. If a school wants to raise awareness about civic values, keep the flag in every classroom and pair it with a short monthly feature on a constitutional principle. If a company wants to avoid symbolic whiplash at the office, set a small set of stable practices for shared spaces and offer broad freedom for employees at their desks. The point is to make room rather than sweep the room.

Addition also means teaching the history of American dissent under the flag. Show images of John Lewis walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge with the Stars and Stripes visible in the crowd. Show scenes from naturalization ceremonies where brand new citizens, with accents from every continent, clutch small flags with both hands. Show military funerals where the most eloquent gesture is the presentation of that folded triangle to a family. Show athletes kneeling peacefully and explain why some see it as protest, others as disrespect, and how both responses flow from real experiences. The flag can hold that conversation because it has already held so much.

Edge cases and judgment calls

Edge cases test our instincts. What if a community's state flag includes a symbol that many find offensive? Some states have changed their designs through broad public process, as Mississippi did in 2020. Before the change, many entities chose not to fly the state flag at all. That was not a rejection of the idea of state pride. It was a considered judgment that a particular version of a symbol did not represent the whole community. Process matters. The change came through a statewide vote and a design commission, not a late-night order to take down all flags without explanation.

What about private citizens who display the flag in ways others consider improper? The Flag Code is advisory. You can recommend best practices, host a community workshop with a veterans group on flag etiquette, and lead by example. But you do not need to turn porch arguments into police calls.

What about international flags at schools with many immigrant families? Fly them as part of an educational display inside a gym or cafeteria, labeled and connected to lessons on geography and culture, while reserving the primary poles outside for the national and state flags. Clarity plus inclusion. No one gets confused about what speaks for the institution and what welcomes the individuals within it.

The emotional core

Underneath the legal analysis and the policy templates is something simpler. People want to feel at home. That is what Expressing Patriotism, Pride, and Freedom is about. Belonging. The American flag, at its best, whispers you are part of a story larger than yourself, and you can help write its next chapter. For some, that whisper is not yet audible because of real hurts. We do not fix that by silencing the symbol. We fix it by earning trust in a hundred daily acts, many of which happen under a flag, not in its absence.



I think of the naturalization ceremonies I have attended. In one, a man in his seventies from Ukraine wept as he said the Oath of Allegiance, his voice softer than the room, his hands trembling. After the ceremony he held that small paper flag they hand out at such events like a relic. He had known governments that treated him as a subject. He wanted to die a citizen. No one in that room argued about whether the flag was inclusive. It was obvious. It included him.

I think also of a Black Marine I met outside a stadium who had lost friends to war and had been pulled over too many times at home. He told me he stands a little straighter for the anthem but also spends time mentoring kids who no longer believe America sees them. His way of loving the country was to stay and fight for its best self. He wore the flag on a patch on his jacket. He had earned it. He would have earned it even without the uniform, because citizenship asks work of all of us.

What we risk by silence

If we allow our public spaces to empty of national symbols out of fear of offense, we teach a lesson that spills into other areas. We tell people to keep the best parts of themselves tucked away. That kind of caution breeds cynicism. It encourages a spectator mindset, citizens who wait to be told what is acceptable. It flattens pride into something that fits inside a holiday sale.

Public life needs visible anchors. The flag is one. The welcome sign at the city limit is another. The mural of local heroes, the roll call of the fallen, the museum exhibit about hard chapters in our story, the chalkboard outside a coffee shop that says vote on Tuesday – these are the stitches in the civic fabric. Pull them, and the fabric holds for a while. Keep pulling, and eventually it frays.

I am not arguing for more flags in every direction without thought. I am arguing for confidence, context, and care. It should not be controversial to say that the American flag belongs in American public life. It should not be naïve to say that people might disagree about how it is used. Both truths can live in the same room. They already do.

A short playbook for institutions

- Keep the national and state flags as fixed features of government spaces, clearly identified as official speech.
- Create a separate, well-labeled channel for community displays with a calendar, criteria, and a simple application process.
- Teach the constitutional principles that surround patriotic expression, including the right to dissent and the ban on compelled speech.
- Use ceremonies and stories to layer meaning, not to demand conformity.
- Review policies annually in public, with representatives from veterans groups, civil rights organizations, students, and recent immigrants.

This approach will not please every critic. It will give the majority a way to live together without constant border skirmishes over symbols.

The next time a well-meaning administrator asks whether a flag should come down to avoid conflict, try a different frame. Ask what would help people see themselves inside the same frame as their neighbors. Ask whether silence is really kindness, or just avoidance. Ask whether the young people watching are learning to hide, or to show up wisely.

The flag is not a fragile thing. It has crossed oceans, walked campaigns, marched in parades where children toss candy and in parades where dogs snarl. It has flown at half-staff more times than we care to count, and it has lifted at dawn over homes barely standing after storms. It is strong cloth because it has carried heavy meanings. Let it do that work. Let it fly, and let people speak near it. That tension is the American way, the one where identity is shared loudly enough to matter and softly enough to invite.