



VETERANS DEFENDING THE BILL OF RIGHTS

P. O. Box 15, Newburgh, IN 47629

May 4, 2006

RE: Oppose S.J. Res. 12, the Flag Desecration Constitutional Amendment

Dear Senator:

My name is Gary May. I am writing to you today as the chair of a group called Veterans Defending the Bill of Rights to urge you to oppose S.J. Res. 12, the flag desecration constitutional amendment. I know you hear from some who say veterans support this amendment, but you should also know that there are many veterans that have faithfully served our nation who strongly believe that amending the Constitution to ban flag desecration is the antithesis of freedoms they fought to preserve.

I lost both my legs in combat while serving in the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam. I challenge anyone to find someone who loves this country, its people and what it stands for more than I do. It offends me when I see the flag burned or treated disrespectfully. But, as offensive and painful as this is, I still believe that dissenting voices need to be heard, even if their methods cause offense.

This country is unique and special because the minority, the unpopular, the dissident also have a voice. The freedom of expression, even when it hurts the most, is the truest test of our dedication to the principles that our flag represents.

In addition to my military combat experience, I have been involved in veterans' affairs as a clinical social worker, program manager, board member of numerous veterans organizations, and advocated on their behalf since 1974. Through all of my work in veterans' affairs, I have yet to hear a veteran say that his or her service and sacrifice was in pursuit of protecting the flag.

When confronted with the horrific demands of combat, the simple fact is that most of us fought to stay alive. The pride and honor we feel is not in the flag per se. It's in the principles for which it stands for and the people who have defended them.

I am grateful for the many heroes of our country. All the sacrifices of those who served before us would be for naught, if the Constitution were amended to cut back on our First Amendment rights for the first time in the history of our great nation. I write to you today to attest to the fact that many veterans do not wish to exchange fought-for freedoms for protecting a tangible object that represents these freedoms.

To illustrate my point, here is what some of the Veterans Defending the Bill of Rights have said about this amendment:

- "During the fighting in Iraq, I saw friends of mine die in battle. Each of us suffered and sacrificed to provide freedom to the Iraqi people. With this in mind, I am profoundly disturbed by the apparent willingness of Congress to sacrifice our own freedoms here at home by amending the First Amendment for the first time ever. When the coalition forces entered Iraq, it was to topple a brutal and repressive dictatorship, one that did not hesitate to jail and torture its own citizens who protested against it. By amending the Constitution to ban a form of expression, Congress dishonors the legacy of servicemembers who fought and died in defense of freedom."

- Jeremy Broussard, Bowie, MD, a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former Captain in the U.S. Army whose artillery unit was among the first to enter Iraq.
- "The proposed constitutional amendment is in my eyes, and the eyes of countless other veterans, a slap in the face to our service in combat. We volunteered to go to war to protect the freedoms in this country, not watch them be taken away by politicians who have never been to the front lines. I consider myself an independent-minded conservative, and believe that creating unnecessary amendments to the U.S. Constitution is a betrayal of conservative principles."

- Specialist Eric G Eliason, Englewood, CO, a combat veteran who served as an Infantryman in the Army for three years, including one year overseas as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.
- "It is a bad thing to burn the flag, but it is a worse thing to damage the Constitution."

- James Pryde, Tuskegee Airman, combat veteran of the 477 Bomber Group in WWII.
- "After devoting most of my career to working in military intelligence, I was appointed Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence in 1997. I served in that position until my retirement in 2000. I am well acquainted with the many threats facing the United States, and I must say that flag burning does not begin to rise to a level of threat justifying the attention of this distinguished body... I served in the United States Army, like my father before me, to defend fundamental American liberties. To begin the trend of amending the First Amendment each time a particular form of speech is found to be offensive sets a dangerous precedent, and undermines the very freedoms for which I and my fellow servicemembers served."

- Lt. General Claudia J. Kennedy (USA, Ret.). Highest ranking woman to ever serve in the U.S. Army.
- "Like many of those who have served in the armed forces, I am deeply concerned about this proposed attempt to undermine free speech. While I do take offense at disrespect to the flag, I nonetheless believe it my duty to defend the constitutional right of protestors to use the flag in nonviolent speech."

- Richard Olek, Fargo, ND, Army veteran and past Commander of AMVETS Jon A. Greenley Memorial Post 7 in Fargo
- "Today the U.S. Senate is again debating an amendment to the Constitution to ban desecration of the flag. It's an issue on which I believe I can claim some authority. I laid my life on the line and fought under the flag of the United States during World War II. I watched some of my closest friends fall during eight grueling campaigns, I was awarded a Silver Star and Purple Heart. I'm a disabled veteran and long standing Republican since

1940, and nothing angers me more than the desecration of the U.S. flag. It is an abomination to me and to other veterans. That said, though, I believe the push to amend the Constitution to criminalize flag burning is misguided. Our forefathers would spin in their graves to think that our government would turn the established principle of free speech on its end and consider persecuting people who disagree with its actions."

- James Bird, Lumberton, NJ, is a decorated veteran of World War II, where he survived eight campaigns in combat and was a liberator of the Dachau concentration camp.

- "...to undertake to carve out an area of free speech and say that this or that is unpatriotic because it is offensive is a movement that will unravel our liberties and do grave damage to our nation's freedom. The ability to say by speech or dramatic acts what we feel or think is to be cherished not demeaned as unpatriotic...I hope you will hear my plea. Please do not tinker with the First Amendment."
-Reverend Edgar Lockwood, Falmouth, Massachusetts, served as a naval officer engaged in more than ten combat campaigns in WWII.
- "My military service was not about protecting the flag; it was about protecting the freedoms behind it. The flag amendment curtails free speech and expression in a way that should frighten us all."
-Brady Bustany, West Hollywood, California, served in the Air Force during the Gulf War.
- "The first amendment to our constitution is the simplest and clearest official guarantee of freedom ever made by a sovereign people to itself. The so-called 'flag protection amendment' would be a bureaucratic hamstringing of a noble act. Let us reject in the name of liberty for which so many have sacrificed, the call to ban flag desecration. Let us, rather, allow the first amendment, untrammelled and unfettered by this proposed constitutional red tape, to continue be the same guarantor of our liberty for the next two centuries (at least) that it has been for the last two."
-State Delegate John Doyle, Hampshire County, West Virginia served as an infantry officer in Vietnam.
- "As a twenty two year veteran, combat experience, shot up, shot down, hospitalized more than a year, Purple Heart recipient, with all the proper medals and badges I take very strong exception to anyone who says that burning the flag isn't a way of expressing yourself. In my mind this is clearly covered in Amendment I to the Constitution – and should not be 'abridged'."
-Mr. Bob Cordes, Mason, Texas was an Air Force fighter pilot shot down in Vietnam. He served for 22 years from 1956 to 1978.
- "Service to our country, not flag waving, is the best way to demonstrate patriotism."
-Mr. Jim Lubbock, St. Louis, Missouri, served with the Army in the Phillipines during WWII. His two sons fought in Vietnam, and members of his family have volunteered for every United States conflict from the American Revolution through Vietnam with the exception of Korea. His direct ancestor, Stephen Hopkins, signed the Declaration of Independence.

- “The burning of our flag thoroughly disgusts me. But a law banning the burning of the flag plays right into the hands of the weirdoes who are doing the burning.... By banning the burning of the flag, we are empowering them by giving significance to their stupid act. Let them burn the flag and let us ignore them. Then their act carries no significance.”

-Mr. William Ragsdale, Titusville, Florida, an engineer who worked in the space industry for over 30 years, retired from the US Naval Reserve in 1984 with the rank of Commander, having served in the Navy for over forty years including active duty in both WWII and the Korean War. He has two sons who served in Vietnam.

- “I fought for freedom of expression not for a symbol. I fought for freedom of Speech. I did not fight for the flag, or motherhood, or apple pie. I fought so that my mortal enemy could declare at the top of his lungs that everything I held dear was utter drivel...I fought for unfettered expression of ideas. Mine and everybody else's.”

-Mr. John Kelley, East Concord, Vermont, lost his leg to a Viet Cong hand grenade while on Operation Sierra with the Fox Company 2nd Battalion 7th Marines in 1967.

I hope you will join me and the Veterans Defending the Bill of Rights in opposing S.J. Res. 12, the flag desecration constitutional amendment. We must not allow this “feel good” measure to restrict freedoms for which so many veterans sacrificed so much. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,



Gary E. May