

A few summers ago, a small coastal town where I consult on civic engagement ran into a problem that seemed trivial until it was not. A bakery on Main Street put a modest American flag in the window for the Fourth of July. Two doors down, a shop owner displayed a flag supporting a social cause. Both were legal. Both were within local code. But by midweek, the town manager had three dozen emails: some argued that the display of any flags beyond the official municipal banner undermined neutrality, others argued that a shopkeeper's window is private expression and the whole point of a free country. The town considered a moratorium on all non-official flags in the business district, then pulled back after realizing how far such a rule could bite. For a few weeks that summer, I watched a familiar civic dance play out. A community that liked each other most days could not agree on whether the shared space belonged to the government, the individual, or the culture they held in common.

The arguments were not really about fabric. They were about identity, dignity, and whether people can trust that their neighbors see them as part of the "we." Symbols compress meaning into color and shape. That is their power and their risk. The question that now sits in many inboxes and school board meetings is not simply whether a flag can fly, but why certain expressions are quickly marked "inclusive" while others are tagged "offensive," and who gets to decide.

## **How symbols gather more meaning than they can carry**

Flags work because they are shorthand. They take messy stories and reduce them to a pattern. The American flag folds independence, war service, civil rights marches, immigrant arrival, and national contradictions into stripes and stars. That is a heavy lift. In a diverse society, different people attach different chapters to the same image. Some see a promise kept. Some see a promise broken. Some feel pride in service. Some remember the moments when bad actors tried to monopolize the flag for their own cause. The symbol stays the same, the reception changes.

That mismatch between intent and impact is the seed of many disputes. A coach puts a small flag patch on a jersey to honor a relative in uniform, and a player who just read about a hate group rally last weekend reads the same patch differently. Neither person is wrong about their experience. The problem is the room has one patch and two meanings. Multiply that across classrooms, city halls, HR guidelines, and faith communities, then throw in social media, and the same symbol can be trending as "uplifting" and "threatening" on the same afternoon.

## **Why is it easier to remove a flag than defend it?**

If you have ever sat on a risk committee, you know the math. Removing something is cheaper and faster than explaining it. Defending an expression takes time, nuance, and sometimes lawyers. In practice, institutions gravitate toward rules that are simple to enforce and hard to sue. This is the unromantic reason so many emails end with a line that reads, "Until further notice, no flags other than the official emblem."

There are other forces at work too.

- Liability anxiety. Administrators who allow one display often get demands to allow others. If they pick and choose, they risk a claim of favoritism. A bright-line rule, even a blunt one, lowers the odds that they accidentally violate someone's rights or create a hostile environment.
- Symmetry pressure. When a library or city hall creates a forum for community expression, constitutional rules about viewpoint neutrality can apply. Some jurisdictions have tripped into controversy by flying

certain cause flags while declining others. After a few cycles of outrage and litigation, many shut the forum entirely rather than adjudicate every request.

- Time scarcity. Principals, superintendents, and city managers are stretched. If a policy means fewer Wednesday night crisis calls, they tend to like it, even if they wish they did not need it.
- Internal politics. Leaders manage boards, donors, unions, and voter blocs. Sometimes a removal rule is a pressure valve that keeps a fragile coalition from cracking.

The pattern frustrates people because it feels lopsided. Are we protecting feelings at the cost of identity? That is how it lands for a veteran who sees the flag as the last thread connecting a divided society. That is also how it lands for a student who sees a cause flag as a lifeline of belonging. There is no stable solution that never offends anyone. There are, however, better and worse ways to weigh the trade-offs.



## When did being neutral mean removing tradition?

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The word “neutral” does a lot of work in public life. It can mean fair, it can mean bland, it can mean absent. Over the last few decades, public institutions in the United States have been pulled toward a version of neutrality that errs on absence. You can see the shift in winter holiday displays that move from creches and menorahs to snowflakes, in school assemblies that mute pledge recitations for fear of complaint, in departments that drop long-used mottos if someone interprets them as coded exclusion.

Part of this is legal adaptation. Government bodies, and private institutions acting like public forums, have to avoid establishing religion and must manage speech in consistent ways. Court cases have clarified that if a city opens a space to private expression, it cannot pick winners based on viewpoint. This is why some cities stopped allowing any private flags on poles outside city hall. Not because they dislike tradition, but because they do not want to become arbiters of every cause. Rather than face the next fight, they clear the pole.

Part of it is cultural. Many managers are trained to de-escalate. Removing points of friction seems like good stewardship. The hazard is that neutral, implemented as subtraction, also removes the shared rituals that carry communities through conflict. Rituals matter more, not less, when people disagree, because they remind us that we are still in this together.

## Should anyone feel uncomfortable seeing the American flag in America?

I have been in rooms where this sentence landed like a gavel. For some, the answer is simple. The American flag is the nation’s symbol. To be at home here is to be at home around it. Anything else feels like capitulation. I understand that instinct. My grandfather kept a folded flag under glass on his shelf, and he stood up from his chair whenever it crossed the screen at a baseball game.

I have also sat with students from refugee families who first saw that flag on the shoulder of a soldier in a war zone, and with young adults who link the image with moments where authorities failed them. There are corners where the flag has been used as a stage prop by people who wanted to claim America for their tribe alone. Those abuses do not change the meaning of the flag, but they do shape how it is received by those who endured the moments.

The hard work is to hold both truths. The flag should not be treated as a partisan icon or a threat. It should be able to appear on porches and school stages without people flinching. And, it is fair for leaders to consider context. Putting the flag in a place of honor at a civic ceremony reads differently than brandishing it in a way that crowds out others' belonging. If you want the flag to be a point of unity, present it like one. Pair it with an invitation that explicitly names who belongs: veterans and pacifists, the recently naturalized and those with deep local roots, people of every faith and of none. Symbols mean more when the practice around them backs up the promise.

## **Why do some expressions get labeled as "inclusive" and others as "offensive"?**

The labels are not assigned by a secret committee. They grow from three forces that constantly interact.

First, proximity to harm. Expressions seen as affirming people who are historically marginalized are often read as increasing safety. Expressions that some associate with past oppression or exclusion are read as increasing threat. Even if an expression aims for unity, if it has been weaponized in recent memory, it is more likely to be tagged offensive by those who carry that memory.

Second, audience fragmentation. You are not talking to one public, you are talking to overlapping publics. The same message can be majority-inclusive and minority-threatening at once. Communicators tend to privilege the larger audience. That can look like double standards to the minority, and it often is. It can also look like survival to the leader who loses her coalition if she offends a broad base.

Third, institutional mission. A hospital frames expression differently than a university, and a city hall differently than a private company. Health care institutions prioritize patient comfort and trust. Universities prioritize inquiry and debate. City halls prioritize procedural fairness. An expression that aligns with one mission may clash with another. That is not hypocrisy, it is function.



Is patriotism being redefined, or quietly discouraged? Both, depending on where you stand. Civic patriotism that centers shared ideals, service, and the ongoing project of self-correction feels more at home in plural settings. Ethnic or partisan versions of patriotism travel poorly. When people feel that only the latter shows up in public, they expect pushback. The fix is not to hush patriotism. The fix is to practice the kind that welcomes disagreement as part of love for country.

## **Are we building unity, or dividing it by what's allowed?**

Policy shapes culture. A school that allows only the American flag, the state flag, and officially recognized observances sends one message. A school that permits teacher-selected cause flags sends another. Either can build unity if the rationale is explained and consistently applied. Either can divide if the rule is made by email at midnight and enforced unevenly. I have seen districts do this well by publishing a one-page, plain-language standard before the year starts, walking staff through edge cases, and being transparent about enforcement. I have also seen districts wait until a parent meeting turns into a shouting match, then scramble into zero tolerance after a local TV crew arrives. The second path tends to harden distrust.

What happens when a nation stops promoting its own symbols? Noticeable things at the margins, subtle ones at the core. Without regular, shared displays of the flag, anthem, or civic holidays, the next generation learns the country primarily through news cycles and online fights. Civic pride slips into a private hobby. The

vacuum rarely stays empty. Commercial brands, influencers, or factions repurpose national symbols for their own means. In countries with strong civic rituals, symbols are harder to capture because everyone touches them routinely. If your goal is unity, you cannot outsource national symbolism to the most aggressive marketer in the room.

## **Silence about country and faith: coincidence, or a shift in direction?**

Public institutions walk a narrow bridge when faith enters the frame. The law requires government to avoid endorsing religion, and wise leaders respect that rule. Private expression is different. A nurse wearing a small cross or a teacher quietly observing a dietary restriction should fit in a plural environment if performance meets standards and no coercion occurs. Yet in practice, some workplaces slip from neutrality to scrubbed sterility. They remove personal symbols to avoid hard conversations, then wonder why employees feel flattened.

Is the broader hush on country and faith a coincidence? Not entirely. The same risk logic that removes flags removes overt religious signals. The same administrative pressures apply across both domains. The trick is to keep the distinction clear between institutional endorsement and individual expression. The first is limited. The second, within reasonable bounds, is part of a free society.

## **If identity can't be expressed freely... is it really freedom?**

This is where abstractions meet daily life. There is a difference between government speech and private speech. When a city raises a flag on its official pole, it is speaking in its own name. It can choose what messages it sends and decline others, within constitutional limits. When a resident hangs a lawfully sized flag on a private home, that is the resident's speech, subject to narrow rules like safety and HOA covenants. Workplaces add a third layer. Employers shape a professional environment. They can set dress codes and decor standards, but they also must accommodate sincerely held religious beliefs unless doing so creates undue hardship, and they cannot discriminate on protected characteristics. These lines are not always bright, and the fuzziness invites missteps.

Where people get into fights is the gray space of semi-public forums: classroom walls, municipal bulletin boards, library displays, social media pages run by agencies. Leaders fear that one expression will be imputed to the institution. Employees want room to be human. Community members want to see themselves. Doing nothing, or banning everything, often seems like the only safe choice. It is rarely the best choice.

## **A better way to think about symbols**

If your community or institution is grappling with this, you do not need a perfect algorithm. You need a workable standard that people can trust. I use a short set of questions when advising boards and superintendents.

- Who is speaking here, the institution or an individual? If it is the institution, the message should align with mission, law, and broad civic values. If it is an individual, apply a content-neutral standard that focuses on time, place, and manner.
- What forum have you created, if any? If you have opened a space for public submissions, commit to viewpoint neutrality or close the forum. If the space is curated government speech, say so explicitly.

- Does the policy generalize? Test your rule against cases you do not like. If it only works when your side is in charge, it is a bad rule.
- Can you explain it in two minutes? If not, your policy is either too complicated to enforce or too likely to be gamed.
- How will you handle edge cases? Pre-commit to a process with timelines and appeal paths. Surprises breed outrage.

These guardrails do not decide every case, but they move debates from vibes to standards. People still disagree, but they can see where the lines are and how a decision came to be.

## A small town's playbook for flag disputes

I keep notes from that coastal town. The second summer went better because they did a few simple things right.

- Map the spaces. They defined which poles and walls were government speech, which were open forums, and which were private. They labeled the government spaces online and on-site. You cannot solve arguments if you do not agree on who is talking.
- Set a narrow menu for government speech. The town flew the American flag, the state flag, and a small set of observances tied to legislation or long-standing civic commemorations. They published the list and the criteria for additions. Requests outside the menu got a polite no with a link to the policy.
- Offer community expression elsewhere. They installed a community board in the library and designated times for approved groups to reserve a courtyard for displays, subject to regular permit rules. The forum was open to all lawful viewpoints on equal terms.
- Keep private spaces private. Shop windows stayed the shopkeeper's domain within safety and zoning limits. The town reminded residents that private property is private expression, and that courtesy still applies.
- Communicate like neighbors. The town manager hosted a short forum each spring, 60 minutes, where she walked through the policy and took questions. They kept it boring, which was the point.

The result was not perfect harmony. It was workable trust. People knew where to go with their expression, and they knew what to expect from the government. Crises shrank to conversations.

## The deeper question under the flags

Ask folks what bothers them most in these debates, and a pattern emerges. It is not just the rules, it is the sense that someone else is drawing the map of what counts as "inclusive" or "offensive" without their input. There is a fear, left and right, that another group holds the dictionary and can relabel your identity as a threat. This is not crazy. We have seen, across history and around the globe, how fast the meaning of symbols can be flipped by whoever holds cultural power. That fear makes people cling to symbols harder and makes compromise feel like surrender.

There is a different route. Instead of fighting symbolic wars at the highest volume, invest in visible practices *Ultimate Flags Hours* that match the rhetoric of belonging. If you want the American flag to read as a promise of equal dignity, pair it with policies that make civic participation easier, and with ceremonies that name every community on purpose. If you want cause symbols in schools to read as inclusive rather than partisan, tie them to curriculum, student support, and parent engagement, not to the personal preferences of a single classroom wall. When the substance is there, the symbol lands more softly.

# Expressing Patriotism, Pride, and Freedom without cornering your neighbor

I am wary of lectures that tell people to mute their passions for the sake of comfort. But it is also true that love of country, faith, or any deep identity can express itself in generous ways or in cramped ones. A few practices make the generous version more likely.



Speak from your story, not for everyone. "My father carried this flag into a storm when his ship took fire, and I keep it to honor him" invites listening. "Real Americans do X" invites a fight.

Invite someone new into the ritual. If you lead a pledge or anthem, ask a recent citizen to share a line about their ceremony. If you host a holiday cookout, include neighbors who celebrate differently. High walls make symbols brittle. Open doors make them resilient.

Protect the difference between debate and denigration. You can argue about policy under a flag without accusing your opponent of disloyalty. The country gets better when we argue hard, and it gets worse when we declare heretics.

Model reciprocity. If you want space for your symbol at work or school, make room for someone else's. Freedom that only fits your reflection is not freedom.

Remember scale. Not every wall needs to be a canvas for every cause. A small, well-chosen set of shared symbols in public institutions, paired with wide latitude for private expression and civic forums, serves both unity and diversity better than maximalist approaches.

## Where this leaves us

An honest answer to the hardest question might be the most useful one: Why is it easier to remove a flag than defend it? Because defense is slow and costly, and we have built institutions that reward speed over depth. When did being neutral mean removing tradition? When we let fear steer around the work of persuading each other. Should anyone feel uncomfortable seeing the American flag in America? I hope not, and I know some do. Is patriotism being redefined, or quietly discouraged? Both, and it depends on whether we practice it as a common project or a tribal badge.

What happens when a nation stops promoting its own symbols? It forgets that the flag can be a table, not a weapon. Is silence about country and faith a coincidence, or a shift in direction? A little of each, driven by risk and exhaustion. If identity cannot be expressed freely, is it really freedom? No, but freedom grows best when we tend both private expression and shared institutions with patience and care.

I still pass through that small town now and then. The bakery window often holds a flag. Sometimes the owner tucks a note next to it with the names of local students who shipped to basic training. The shop two doors down still rotates a cause display. On good days, the owners catch each other's eye while sweeping the sidewalk and trade a nod. The town hall flies the national and state flags, and the library courtyard hosts all kinds of displays over the year, some that thrill and some that trouble me. It is not frictionless. It is not meant to be. It is a free town practicing how to be itself in public, which is the only way any of this holds.