

Army, Flag, and Cross

REVERIE ON A RIBBON

Stephen J. Gallagher

*When Fascism arrives it will be wrapped in a Flag
and carrying a Bible.*

—Sinclair Lewis

B*rilliant.* It was the first word that came to mind when I saw the bumper sticker. The vehicle ahead ground slowly through rush-hour traffic. I had time to study it, to think about what the thing meant.

It was yet another variant on the ubiquitous American “yellow ribbon.” Across the front, on a field of yellow, were the words “Support Our Troops.” The ribbon looped back and showed a field of white stars on a blue background, evoking the American flag. The cleverest part of the ribbon was the last section, hanging below the “Support Our Troops” slogan. It was red-and-white striped, intended to carry forward the American flag theme. But a subtle suggestion of a white sunburst joined with the vertical white stripe and overlaid it with a faint horizontal white stripe. It didn’t take me more than a few seconds to realize that this was intended to be a subtle evocation of the Christian cross.

There it was encapsulated, complete, uncut, pure: the symbolic essence of an America that has drifted far from civilization, an America that has grown very, very strange. The America that bumper sticker symbolizes has left behind the world of rational nation-states and slipped off into a sentimental realm of Romanticism.

Romanticism is a worldview that privileges strong emotions such as pride, horror, and awe. (The ominous, drum-beating music that opens American news broadcasts today screams “War! Terror! Fear! Pride! Revenge!,” striving to derange the viewer’s senses and conflate these primitive emotions with a feeling of patriotism.) Additionally, Romanticism privileges the individual imagination as the single, unshakable source of truth, which stems from the American insistence on a “personal relationship with God” rather than traditional hierarchical religious practices. When speaking of Romanticism, as Baudelaire pointed out, it is not the truth of the thing in question that is important but rather the overwhelming *personal emotions* that the thing inspires.

Such is very much the case with America’s fetishistic Romanticism. At the political level, Romantic nationalism

takes as its starting point the “white man’s burden” and America’s unique world-historical mission to “bring” democracy to the benighted peoples of the world.

We need to look closely at that ribbon, understand its symbolism, and above all understand how its dangerous Romantic sentimentalism plays out in the real world.

America has always been besotted with religion. The Puritans abandoned Europe because their religious lunacy put them beyond the pale of acceptable behavior. Considering that during these years Europe was knee-deep in blood from its many religious wars and witches were being routinely hanged and burned for consorting with the Devil, the idea that this group was too extreme speaks volumes.

While Europeans are more secular, Americans remain a people for whom the Devil is real. Our nation’s history bristles with Romantic religious enthusiasms, revivals, and fundamentalist upsurges. The forward march of civilization has done nothing to dampen this.

One is often left speechless after reading the public pronouncements of high-ranking military personnel—pronouncements more suitable to Europe at the time of the Crusades than to a developed country in the opening years of the new millennium. For example, we have the infamous “Christian Soldier,” General William G. Boykin, strutting in full dress uniform and thumping his chest as he proclaims to gatherings of hard-Right religious groups: “We, in the Army of God, in the Kingdom of God, have been raised for such a time as this!” General Peter Pace, seemingly a sensible and levelheaded Marine who rose to head the Joint Chiefs of Staff, once defended the leadership of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by stating, “He leads in a way that the good Lord tells him is best for our country.” This increasingly brazen willingness of our top military leaders to publicly “witness for faith” is alarming, to say the least.

Yet more alarming is the well-organized, brilliantly executed strategy of “breeding up” the next generation of religious-lunatic military personnel, starting as early as the preteen years. America is experiencing an explosion of organizations that resemble the “youth on the march” organizations so often seen in totalitarian nations during the last century.

The Christian youth movement Battle Cry holds massive gatherings in stadiums and other large public venues all over America. The rallies are high-energy, high-concept, and driven by the frenetic musical beat of a shoot-em-up video game. Live “action figures” of Navy SEALs and other military paragons charge onstage, screaming to the crowd that they are proud “Christian warriors” and acting out scenes from “the war against Islamic Fascism” while they brief the stadium full of kids on their heroic future as part of the “battle plan for Jesus.” These disturbing antics are followed by the reading of an endorsement of Battle Cry by George W. Bush, a moment that sends the thousands of overwrought young people into paroxysms of testifying, swooning, weeping, and general adolescent hysteria. This combination of testosterone-laden posturing paired with military and Christian symbolism is a brilliant recruiting tool for the apocalyptic “long war” that so many on the religious Right crave. One hopes those kids will wake up the next day feeling the way kids do after a night of binge-drinking and slam-dancing: beat-up, sheepish, and resolved never to engage in that particular form of idiocy

again. One suspects not; most of these kids have never felt such overwhelming emotional and physical excitement in their entire lives, and they are going to want more.

Coupled with the resurgence of a broad-shouldered, muscular Christianity is a fetishistic new obsession with the Stars and Stripes as a quasi-religious object. There has always been a certain sentimental attachment to the flag in American culture (phrases like “Old Glory” and songs like “She’s a Grand Old Flag” are not recent inventions), but since the events of September 11, 2001, the irrational defense of the flag as a physical object has become increasingly strident. Everywhere one turns in America, the iconography of The Flag is thrust into one’s face in a way that I have never before seen in my lifetime. The most disturbing aspect may be the premise that the flag itself may not be burned or otherwise “desecrated.” Perhaps alone among the nations of the world, America has decided that the actual, physical flag—rather than the ideas it represents—must be kept physically pure and protected from the ravages of the unworthy.

Flag worship in America has revealed a deep well of Romantic, fetishistic thinking, imbuing an object in the physical world with some sort of ineffable *mojo*. Such behavior is a form of emotional voodoo. Flags are not to be worshipped in a free and democratic state.

Free democracies also do not worship their armies. When they think about them at all, they regard them as necessary evils. For over two hundred years, America kept faith with George Washington’s caution that “overgrown military establishments are under any form of government inauspicious to liberty.” Even at the height of the Cold War, the military was never glamorized as it is now. It is impossible to find anything like the current Army worship anywhere in American history; indeed, to find any equivalent in the twentieth century, one must turn to such totalitarian societies as Nazi Germany, the USSR, North Korea, or Saddam’s Iraq. The title of a 2007 “ultimate fighting” television program—*Warrior Nation*—sums up the new order of things. Modern America sees itself as the new Sparta. And in the new Sparta, the imperative to worship the warrior class is one of the few taboos that must never be violated.

Unlike other Western countries whose citizens have come (through centuries of bleeding) to view war as a horrible aberration—a failure of rational solidarity—America’s Romantic nationalists *embrace* the prospect of spending years, decades, and even centuries in the righteous work of fighting the long war to “rid the world of evil.” The “warrior” is fetishized and lifted to a place beyond any possibility of criticism. Implicit in the mantra “Support the Troops” is a hissed addendum: *Or else!*

Review the images in your mind: Grainy newsreel footage of Hitler “blessing the colors.” The massive, militarized May Day love fests in Red Square. The manic triumphalism of military parades staged by every tin-pot dictator ever to reign in the Third World. And realize that now it is America’s turn.

America has begun to worship the professional military class and, more ominously, to glorify military ideals. The unspoken demand is that the civilian population must now embrace these same values and glorify these same things. Woe betide anyone foolish enough to challenge this new national religion.

One important facet of this Army worship reveals it for the sentimental and Romantic thing that it is: Americans love their military, but in great numbers they refuse to *serve* in it and refuse to let their kids get lured into serving in it. Yet these “latté liberal” suburban parents who work so hard to make sure little Melissa and Cody don’t get any crazy ideas about joining up are the first to chant the tribal mantra: “Condemn the war but not the warrior.” How very problematic this new mantra is—as if one could actually decouple the policy from those who voluntarily implement it.

At what point in our history did blind obedience to bad orders become a virtue? Does it make sense to lionize people for doing something that our rational minds tell us is an extremely bad idea? If one opposes the war, how *can* one support the troops and still claim to be thinking rationally? Doing so has the stench of bad faith. If the people at the top giving the orders are complicit, the people who pull the triggers share in that complicity. No one is innocent; we all own our own decisions.

The evasions Americans prefer in order to give “the warriors” an easy out tend to fall into two categories: “Blame the decision-makers, not the warriors,” and “They only enlisted for economic reasons.” These rationales are alibis and clumsy ones at that.

The first alibi is easily disposed of. Principle I of the Nuremberg Tribunal (to which the United States was a signatory) states that “any person who commits an act which constitutes a crime under international law is responsible therefore and liable to punishment.” Lest anyone complain this is too vague, Principle IV gives us all the clarification we need: “The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.” And let us be clear: one always has to make clear moral choices. There are moments, as Camus reminds us, “when everything becomes clear, when every action constitutes a commitment, when every choice has a price.” This is one of those moments, and to pretend that the people pulling the trigger are not in a very real sense decision-makers is both naïve and absurd. Even at the lowest rungs of the ladder of command, refusal to say “no” is tantamount to complicity.

The second alibi is popular among many Americans, including leftists. In November 2006, *The New York Times* analyzed the demographic patterns of military recruits and discovered that in fact they are slightly *better off* in terms of education, neighborhood, family income, and job prospects than the population as a whole. Are some American soldiers in Iraq there for economic reasons? Sure, but not very many. Did some sign up for the chance to go over and blow away some “rag-heads”? Of course; armies throughout history have always attracted their share of sociopaths. But after removing these two small groups from the list, we are left with the vast majority who went voluntarily and for their own reasons. They made a moral decision. They made a choice. Having made their free choice, are they somehow magically immune from all blame?

They are immune because they are *granted* immunity from blame by the sentiment of the American people. They are given the alibi of the “pure warrior” because the donning of the uniform has become equivalent to the donning of priestly vestments in an earlier age. The “warrior” is immediately sanctified, justified, raised up beyond all criticism from us lesser mortals who lack the moral fiber to wear the vestments. The

American people, living in the midst of this enormous superstructure of myth and alibi, are incapable of understanding that they have armored themselves against evil by manufacturing not the new Sparta, but rather a dystopian and sentimental dreamland.

In America, it appears that the more pathological the coupling between army, flag and cross, the greater need there is to honor “the warrior.” We should be clear on the fact that this is not necessarily something new. This way of thinking was never more clearly expressed than by Secretary of War Elihu Root, who in 1899 declared, “The American soldier is different from all other soldiers of all other countries since the world began. He is the advance guard of liberty and justice, of law and order, and of peace and happiness.”

As these words were being written, American soldiers in the Philippines were in the early stages of a near-genocidal rampage that would kill more than six hundred thousand Filipinos. Not new, this warrior-love, but rampant now and metastasizing.

The American mythos today is saturated with the Holy Trinity of God, the flag, and the armed forces. All are glorified and sanctified in a manner that is overtly sentimental, Romantic, and irrational. These three pillars of American society support an invigorated sense of Manifest Destiny, a wonderful feeling of exceptional purpose that was lost after the collapse of Soviet communism. Americans are excited again: standing tall, feeling the pride, and above all, “on the march.” This toxic mix of army worship, flag worship, and God worship has erupted in a nation where every hope and fear can be rendered down to a slogan on one of the many variations on the yellow ribbon. The irony of it all is that the yellow ribbon was originally a symbol of the grinding, endless sense of *victimhood* that Americans felt during the Iran hostage crisis. Americans everywhere showed the yellow ribbon because there was quite literally nothing else they could do about the situation except sit there and *take it*. For those of us who live in America—and for the rest of the world as well—an understanding of this dangerous liaison between rampant militarism and the sanctified yellow fetish of the angry victim is critically important. This yellow shroud—and make no mistake, it is a shroud and possibly even a death shroud—is a voodoo fetish designed to buck up the courage of a people who have, in a few short years, devolved into a nation of frantic, ribbon-worshipping victims. ■■

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PULL QUOTES

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