

IPS

INSTITU
PRIN
STUD

Commentary

Symbols, Symbolism, and Flag Burning

By Michael R. Winther

April 2008

I just watched a video clip of baseball player, Rick Monday, saving the American flag from the match of a protestor at a major league baseball game in 1976.

As I watched, it occurred to me that there are millions of patriotic Americans who have great respect for the American flag. These Americans would join us in applauding this video and Rick Monday's actions. Most, if not all, of these good, old-fashioned Americans would do exactly as Rick Monday did. This remnant of patriotic Americans would risk life and limb to rescue the American flag from a protestor's match. We know what they are willing to do for a symbol,

but what are they willing to do to protect what that symbol represents? Unfortunately, the answer is usually, "Nothing."

Most flag-waving, and flag-saving, Americans have no understanding of the principles that the American flag should represent, and the few who do understand extend precious little effort to preserve and protect these principles. Most Americans, including many who are patriotic, think that the flag stands for free public education, democracy, homeland security, or the two-party political system. If this is what the flag represents, I would submit that Madison, Jefferson, and Witherspoon might be the ones with the match. Our forefathers bled and died for the concepts of God-given rights and the rule of law. They believed with all of their hearts that liberty should not—and cannot—be exchanged for security. They believed that the Bible set the standard for the proper role of government, not the will of the majority. The principles that our flag should represent are violated almost daily by elected officials of both major parties. Where are all of the patriotic, flag-waving Christians when the 10 commandments are being expelled from one venue after another? Where are these patriots when homosexuality is forced into our schools? Where are they when our government embraces socialism by redistributing wealth for prescription drugs, housing, and farm subsidies?

The symbol should never receive as much respect as what is symbolized. If, as Christians, we are willing to die for the Christian flag that hangs in many of our churches, but unwilling to die for the Savior that it represents, then we are guilty of idolatry. Those of us who love our country and our flag need to be cautious that we don't let the American flag become an idol. We should be infinitely more zealous for the preservation and recovery of the bedrock principles of America than we are for any symbol — flag or otherwise.