

Walk down a main street on a July afternoon and you will see a patchwork of choices. A barber shop with a small flag in the window, an art gallery with a Pride decal, a church with a banner for a food drive, a city hall with bare poles because the council is “reviewing policy.” The American flag hangs in some places and quietly disappears in others. When someone complains, administrators and managers often reach for the safest move. Pull the display, issue a neutral statement, and hope the story dies. It almost always works in the short term. Over time, something subtler happens. Spaces strip out symbols that made them feel like communities rather than lobbies.

That quiet sorting raises uncomfortable questions. Why is it easier to remove a flag than defend it? Are we protecting feelings at the cost of identity? When did being neutral mean removing tradition? If a symbol that has flown for more than two centuries now triggers risk assessments and emergency meetings, what exactly changed, and who gets to decide what is offensive?

## **A quick tour of how we judge symbols**

I started my career managing communications for a midsize city. A symbol fight found me every spring. A veterans group wanted banners on downtown poles before Memorial Day, a student club requested a one day display for a cause week, and an advocacy group insisted that city property should showcase nothing beyond the official flag and seal. The angry emails were rarely about fabric. They were about the meaning that fabric carried, and the fear that others would hijack it.

Two things stood out year after year. First, the same image could comfort one neighbor and unsettle another. Second, most conflicts did not end with a bold defense or a thoughtful compromise. They ended with removal. City attorneys prefer clean lines, and nothing is cleaner than an empty pole.

So, should anyone feel uncomfortable seeing the American flag in America? Feelings are not subject to policy, but policy can be clear about first principles. Governments have a special duty to treat citizens equally, yet they also have a custodial role for shared civic symbols. Ordinary organizations, from homeowners associations to youth leagues, have their own missions and member expectations. A school plays by different rules than a coffee shop. Context matters, and the law gives us useful anchors.

## **What the law actually protects, and what it leaves to judgment**

Free speech law in the United States protects the right to express, and to offend, far more than many people realize. A few guideposts help:

- In 1943, *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* held that students cannot be forced to salute the flag or recite the Pledge. That case did not downgrade the flag. It elevated freedom of conscience and set the tone for how we handle patriotic expression.
- In 1989, *Texas v. Johnson* recognized flag burning as protected speech. You can hate that ruling and still value the principle under it. The government cannot decide which treatments of a symbol count as acceptable dissent.
- In 2017, *Matal v. Tam* told us there is no “offensive speech” exception. The Patent and Trademark Office could not refuse a trademark because it might disparage. The Court made it plain. Government does not get to be the taste police.

For flag displays on government property, the key question is whether the space is government speech or a public forum. If the flagpole is the city's voice, officials can choose to fly only the United States flag and the

state flag. If they open the pole for community groups, they cannot deny a viewpoint just because it offends.

This exact line came up in 2022 in *Shurtleff v. City of Boston*. Boston had allowed hundreds of private group flags on a city hall pole, then refused a Christian group. The Supreme Court said the city had created a public forum, so it could not exclude a religious viewpoint. Boston's response was instructive. It closed the forum, declared the pole government speech, and adopted a tight policy. You can dislike that choice, but it solved the legal exposure. It also meant fewer community flags of any kind.

So yes, it is legally easier to remove a flag than defend it, especially for governments. Simpler policies mean fewer lawsuits. That is rational risk management, not cultural betrayal. The price is cultural, not legal. Every time a public space downgrades a tradition in the name of neutrality, it changes the texture of shared life. When did being neutral mean removing tradition? Often, right after the first credible threat of litigation.

## **Inclusive or offensive, and who gets to say**

Why do some expressions get labeled as inclusive and others as offensive? Partly because we test them in different venues. A poster in a private shop is the owner's speech, bounded by civil rights laws. A banner in a city park, once the city opens the park to banners, becomes a forum question. A pin on a teacher's jacket becomes a workplace policy issue under a school board's rules and First Amendment carve outs for public employees.

Another reason is media shorthand. Inclusive is used for efforts to welcome historically marginalized groups. Offensive is attached to symbols that someone links to exclusion or harm. Those are not neutral labels. They are claims about history, intent, and impact. In a plural country, the same symbol can point to different stories. One person sees the flag and thinks of a grandfather at Okinawa. Another thinks of a night when classmates wrapped themselves in it to taunt. Both experiences are real, but policy cannot set standards by the most painful memory alone. It has to ask what the symbol is, what it means in official use, and whether the space is promising representation or open expression.

The American flag's official meaning is not in doubt. It represents the nation, not a party. If a city hall displays it in a lobby, the city is not taking sides in a policy debate. The dispute comes when other expressions are allowed and the flag is reinterpreted as one team's uniform in a cultural fight. That reframing did not come from a statute. It came from years of marketing, media framing, and political theater. Is patriotism being redefined, or quietly discouraged? Maybe both, depending on the room.

## **The habits of administrators, and the cost of silence**

I have sat through more than a dozen tense meetings about displays, slogans, and risk. The same dogs bark each time. Someone says the display is not essential to the core mission. Someone warns that one complaint can spiral to a lawsuit. Someone else argues that silence is not neutrality, it is a statement about who belongs. Then the email arrives from legal. "Pending policy review, suspend displays."

From a manager's seat, I understand. Policies need to be content neutral and consistently enforced. Each exception invites future challenges. The city's job is to plow the snow, fill the potholes, and balance the budget, not host philosophical experiments about identity in the lobby.

From a citizen's seat, I see the slow bleaching of the public square. What happens when a nation stops promoting its own symbols? You get spaces that feel less like places and more like corridors. Ceremonies lose texture. Newcomers have fewer cues about shared commitments. The flag moves from the front of the

room to a back closet, then back out only for Veterans Day and the Fourth. That shift tells a story, even if no one writes it down.

## **Schools, kids, and the hard edge of policy**

Schools are where these debates get sharp. Teachers are public employees, students are private citizens, and classrooms are both workplaces and forums. Barnette still controls. Students cannot be forced to participate in patriotic rituals. They also cannot be punished for peaceful expression that does not disrupt instruction. Schools have broad leeway to set dress codes and keep classrooms focused, yet they must avoid viewpoint discrimination.

I have advised principals who wanted to remove every non instructional sign. Some did it out of fear, others out of fairness. They also worried about the kid who would test the boundary with a deliberately provocative shirt. If the rule permits a rainbow sticker on a laptop as a sign of inclusion, it cannot forbid a small cross on a backpack because it is religious. If it allows a Black Lives Matter bracelet, it must consider how to handle a Blue Lives Matter patch. The safest rule is often the most sterile. But kids know when adults choose sterile instead of honest. They sense the gap between what is taught about Expressing Patriotism, Pride, and Freedom and the silence that floats over it in practice.

Are we building unity, or dividing it by what is allowed? In many schools, the safest bet becomes the iron rule. No messages at all, except the official flag and the school mascot. That at least treats everyone equally. The cost is missed chances to model civil disagreement.

## **Workplaces and neighborhoods**

Private workplaces can set dress and display standards with wide latitude. The better ones explain their reasons, anchor rules to the mission, and handle exceptions with care. Employees are not a captive audience for anyone else's politics, yet they are also not mannequins. You can respect a service desk person's small lapel flag and still draw a line against turning the front counter into a billboard.

In neighborhoods, homeowners associations often fall back on technical rules. No items on common area fences, no flags beyond specified sizes, holiday windows clear after a set date. The flag becomes part of a catalog. Clear rules avoid fights, but they also magnify them when a neighbor insists on a larger banner or an extra light. The best run associations I have seen add context. They set bright lines, then recognize national days where more is permitted. They publish a one page etiquette guide. They remind residents that the goal is pride without intrusion on others.

If identity cannot be expressed freely, is it really freedom? In private communities, freedom is negotiated at the start with covenants. That is a different bargain than the one you make with a city. People sometimes forget this. They treat a condo lobby as if it were a town hall. It is not.

## **The quiet about country and faith**

Is silence about country and faith a coincidence, or a shift in direction? A bit of both. Smart leaders read the room. They know teams are more ideologically mixed than they were a generation ago, and they want to keep the focus on shared work. They also see that social media can whip a small grievance into a storm in an afternoon. Disciplined silence becomes a shield.

There is also a generational gap in symbolic language. Younger Americans, on average, are less likely to fly a flag at home than their grandparents. Surveys vary, but you can safely say that while most Americans still

express pride in the nation, the intensity has dipped compared to peaks in the late 20th century. People still show service pride, school pride, city pride. They just do it with different cues, often digital. A pinned story on Instagram replaces a porch flag. That does not mean love of country is gone. It means the visible consensus rituals are thinner.



## The difference between care and fragility

Are we protecting feelings at the cost of identity? Sensitivity is not fragility. I have seen veterans tear up in front of a properly folded flag and also tell a teenager that they have every right to sit during the anthem. Care is the grown up balance between reverence and restraint. Fragility is the rush to erase anything that might be misread.

When a library removes a flag because one patron “felt uncomfortable,” it treats feelings as vetoes. Feelings should be heard, not enthroned. The answer to discomfort with the American flag in a public building is not to hide the flag. It is to clarify that the flag represents everyone’s rights, including the right to object, and that no one is required to perform patriotism to be served. Public employees can be trained to respond with warmth and facts. “You do not have to stand. You are welcome here. This flag is here because this is a public institution of the United States.”

## Edge cases that test our judgment

Trade offs are real. A day after a high profile police shooting, a city hall lobby that features a large Thin Blue Line banner alongside the American flag is making a statement. Supporters call it solidarity. Opponents argue it rebrands a national space as one side in an ongoing dispute. Add the timing and it becomes a sharper message than intended. Swap the example to a late term abortion case and a city health department lobby with banners for either side. Same problem. These are situations where officials need to ask whether the space is for service or advocacy.

Some will ask, why not flood the space with everything and let pluralism speak for itself. In practice, that works poorly for service environments. People come to pay a bill or file a permit, not to run a gauntlet of causes. The fix is not to scrub the American flag. The fix is to separate service from forums. Keep routine service spaces reserved for official symbols and information. Host separate areas or schedules for community expression where all lawful viewpoints have equal access.

## A short set of guardrails that works in the real world

I have used the following questions with councils, boards, and supervisors. They are not slogans, they are prompts to keep the center of gravity where it belongs.

- What is the mission of this space today, service or expression?
- Is this display government speech, private speech, or a true forum open to all viewpoints on equal terms?
- Are we applying a clear, content neutral policy that we can enforce next month when the request comes from a different side?

- If we choose neutrality, are we removing tradition, or affirming official symbols and moving all advocacy to designated forums?
- Have we prepared staff with simple scripts to explain the policy without improvisation or apology?

## Stories from the ground, not the comment section

A small town in Ohio faced a summer of back and forth after a resident complained about a row of flags at the library entrance. The row had the United States flag, the state flag, and two community banners. The board froze all displays except the United States and state flags. The meeting minutes show more relief than triumph. Staff had been stuck at the desk fielding daily arguments. A clean policy got them out of the crossfire. Attendance rose for a Constitution Day event held later that fall, in that same lobby, under those two flags. People like clarity.

In a coastal county in California, a high school history teacher put a large American flag on a side [Ultimate Flags buy flag](#) wall and ran a unit on how protest movements have used national symbols. Students brought in images, from Iwo Jima to Selma to a 9 11 memorial. The final assignment asked them to design a respectful use of the flag for a cause they cared about, and to write a reflection about how dissent and loyalty can live together. A parent complained that the class had politicized the flag. The principal sat in for a day, read the materials, and kept the unit. Complaints ended after students presented. Exposure replaced suspicion.

A regional bank in the Southwest told employees they could wear small symbols that reflect personal values, as long as they were not campaign items. That covered a flag pin, a discreet religious symbol, or a charitable ribbon. Anything larger needed approval. When one branch manager kept stretching the boundary, the policy held. HR did not outlaw everything. It enforced what it had already explained. Morale stayed high, and the dress code stayed readable.



## The difference between celebrating and compelling

Barnette is a north star for a reason. You cannot compel orthodoxy. The right to refuse ritual is not a snub to the flag, it is fidelity to what the flag stands for. That is why a healthy public square can celebrate shared symbols without turning them into tests. A school can raise the flag each morning, teach respect for it, and still defend a student's choice to sit. A council chamber can display it prominently and still invite real debate. A city can run citizenship ceremonies that stir tears, then walk downstairs to a forum where residents argue about policy under the same colors.

If we forget that distinction, we drift toward two bad places. On one side, a brittle version of patriotism that mistakes performance for love. On the other, a cynical stripping of symbols that treats shared identity as the first casualty of conflict. Both avoid the adult work of living together. One tries to deny dissent. The other denies that common ground even exists.

## Why removal feels safe, and why defense requires work

It is easier to remove a flag than defend it because removal is a one step act. Defense asks for context, training, and stamina. When a supervisor tells a front desk clerk that the flag stays, they owe that clerk words to use when the next complaint comes. "Our policy is to display official symbols in service areas.

Private displays are featured in the community forum down the hall, which is available to all groups on equal terms." That sentence takes more care than, "We took it down."

Defending a neutral rule also demands consistency. That means saying yes to groups you personally dislike if you have created a forum. It means keeping a record of approvals and denials with reasons tied to time, place, and manner, not content. It means measuring impact on operations, not hair trigger outrage on social media. Most institutions do not invest in that muscle until forced. They treat symbolism as a side chore, then act surprised when it explodes.

## **Tradition in a plural era**

When did being neutral mean removing tradition? The shift began when institutions tried to reconcile two truths. First, Americans do not agree on many social issues and do not live in the same media worlds. Second, the legal bar for viewpoint discrimination is high. Rather than carry the weight of choice, many leaders chose to hollow out the space. That approach protects them from lawsuits and boycotts, but it also starves a shared civic diet.

Neutrality can look different. It can mean affirming foundational symbols while refusing to privilege transient slogans. It can mean teaching why the flag drapes a coffin at a military funeral, and why a protester can kneel during the anthem without being a traitor. It can mean telling a worried new resident, "You belong," while pointing to the same flag that covered an oath ceremony last week. Neutrality done well is not an empty shelf. It is a consistent practice that makes room for many voices without erasing the room itself.

## **A practical, modest path forward**

If you are a leader with authority over a public facing space, you can calibrate without drama. The following steps balance dignity, legality, and hospitality.

- Identify which spaces are for service and which are for expression. Put official symbols in service spaces. Host a true forum elsewhere with content neutral rules.
- Put your policy in writing, in plain language, and publish it where requests begin. Use examples from both left and right.
- Train frontline staff with short scripts. Give them authority to refer disputes to a designated contact rather than improvising.
- Track decisions and review them twice a year. Look for drift, blind spots, and patterns of inconsistency.
- Celebrate civic rituals openly, then defend dissent calmly. Model the difference for the public and for your own team.

## **The center of gravity**

Should anyone feel uncomfortable seeing the American flag in America? People will feel what they feel, but a healthy public life does not treat the national emblem as a partisan provocation. We can refuse to weaponize it without banishing it. We can honor those who serve without turning honor into coercion. We can keep room for those whose family story includes harm done in the name of that symbol, without surrendering the larger meaning it carries.

If you strip a house of pictures because relatives disagree about the frame, you have not solved the argument. You have made the house less of a home. The same goes for the public square. A nation that

stops promoting its own symbols eventually forgets how to teach its own story. That does not make us more open. It makes us forgetful. The American flag should not be above critique, and it should not be below gratitude. It should be present where it belongs, defended with words, not just policies. It should remind us that freedom includes the right to love this country loudly, to question it publicly, and to refuse demanded displays. That tension is not a bug. It is the operating system.

Expressing Patriotism, Pride, and Freedom works best when it is voluntary, informed, and neighborly. The small barber shop flag, the city hall colors, the folded triangle handed to a family, the quiet student who sits during the pledge, the veteran who nods to that student on the way out. These are not contradictions. They are the strands of a country still learning how to live together under the same cloth.