

Trooping the Colors on TV

Carolyn Marvin

It didn't take long for observers of the Gulf War in and out of the reporting business to complain about the lack of hard war news. Two critics wrote in *The New York Times* that "the networks have filled the hard-news gap with experts, maps, and props." They might have added, and flags. American flags, everywhere. As visions of technological purity faded and a profaner and bloodier conflict began to emerge, media flag stories rode shotgun with military information to help "explain" the war. For a month after the first bombs fell on Baghdad, rare was the televised news program without at least one lingering flag shot in at least one emotionally charged story weaving spells against the anticipated sacrifice of Americans.

The recent flag desecration debates suggest that American citizens have many "flags." But the cult of the flag, elaborated and renewed in every major military contest since the Civil War, has offered itself once again as a spiritual resource for a wartime society, though not all citizens embrace it with equal faith. Mostly, in fact, we don't acknowledge our flag religion. Despite plenty of talk about yellow ribbon magic, a less deeply rooted manifestation of the national compact with the gods, there is scant talk of flag magic. I am convinced this is because the official tolerance of all religions in America renders none of them true. In order to protect the power of our civil religion, flag worship is forbidden to speak its name.

Visually focused and dependably repetitive, television is certainly its ideal medium. Since the war's beginning, television has devotedly depicted two of the flag's multiple aspects. One is a species of the untouchable numinous flag, the Durkheimian totem of the social compact. Though the

numinous flag is articulated most dramatically in official ritual (the kind we will see more of as body counts rise), a subliminal version is featured in the world according to television as a constant unremarked backdrop for embodied authority, a parenthetical but endlessly repeated image of American political leadership. Its totem wings folded and at rest, this subliminal flag appears next to the podium whenever the President speaks to the people, and on other demonstrably official occasions. Significantly continuous with the peacetime flag, the subliminal flag provides a detached counterpoint to the drama of official flag ceremonies concerned with sacrifice and death. Though the subliminal flag appears in the same visual field as the President and his men, they are never seen to touch or hold it. Never do they supplicate, embrace, modify, or embellish it. Living within the magic circle of its protection, they have no need to drain its contagious sacred power, or to strive to earn its blessing.

For common soldiers and those who love them, the flag wears a different aspect that television has faithfully captured. This is a shamanistic flag, a conjuring instrument for those who have no power at all to move armies or withdraw them, but whose own bodies are so moved and withdrawn. These bodies do not enjoy the protection of the flag accorded to high officials of state (war-makers who, we know from the fact that they wear suits, are only symbolically at risk), who are its embodied equivalent. Soldiers are never fully the flag's until they are maimed or dead. With so much at stake, they must bargain for its favor. They and their families weave desperate spells, making magical contact through invented rituals of elaboration, decorating the flag and a host of associated symbols with ribbons, stars and hearts (which never appear in presidential lapels), re-creating it in cakes and bouquets, in "living flags" and on clothing, in red-white-and-blue arrangements laced with poignant personal memorabilia. They adorn their dwellings with it, placing it at doors and windows, points of vulnerability to spiritual invasion. They promise to keep it flying until their men, and now their women, return. Waving it, they cast a spell of animation, giving it and their loved ones life and breath. Each hand-held flag vigorously fluttered as soldiers depart for the front is a magic wand that may protect men in battle if the entreaties of flagwavers are powerful enough.

Sentiment is the key to shamanistic flag magic. Ostentatious demonstrations of sentiment in displays and parades that may seem tacky or gauche to those who identify with numinous rulers are what lends this popular magic

its strength. The dignity of official flag ceremony distances the people from the flag. It works through proper gestures and perfected postures. Faultless ritual observances matter more than any feelings of individual participants. In fact, official ritual mandates the concealment of personal feelings which, like objects, must remain at a distance from the numinous untouchable flag. The shamanistic flag requires a different logic. Feelings count more than anything. Creativity, variety, and individuality mark authentic sentiment in charms that work. So important is sentiment that violations of either law (until recently) or the civilian "flag code" derived from official ritual are routinely overlooked in shamanistic usage. In this spirit, a local skating rink may color its ice in the flag's design for delighted skaters, a pro-war marcher may beat his drumsticks on a flag drumface, and a fireman forbidden by his supervisors to wear a flag on his uniform may shave his hair in a flag pattern, dying its parts appropriate colors.

Public objections are directed exclusively at those who refuse the magic. Among them is Marco Lokar, an Italian basketball player at Seton Hall University, hounded out of the country for refusing to display an American flag patch—on his uniform. Altering the flag's design, decorating or making profane objects with it, writing on it, wearing the flag, eating flag cake—all are judged as honorable or dishonorable by intent alone, since those who desire the flag's protection must traverse the forbidden distance between themselves and it to make contact with blessing. The bedecked, touched flag is accessible to a suppliant people.

Is the magic efficacious? On the third day of the war, *USA Today* ran a short piece headlined, "All anyone can do is 'pray, give blood,'" one a ritual spell, the other a sacrificial offering of vital bodily substance as citizen or soldier. There was another spell to be cast as well, found in the short immediately below this one, headlined, "Flag sales are flying to new heights." Along with tales of prayer and blood-giving, stories of flag sales and flag-making suggested the potency of flag magic. Over and over citizens asserted that showing and waving flags constituted the limit of their options to influence the outcome of the war to their liking, and acknowledged in the same words the earnestness of their magical intent. Consider this sampling from the local news:

- Displaying to the camera two fists stuffed with talismanic flags, a gas company supervisor reflected, "I think it's about time everybody showed

patriotism, and there's not enough patriotism. Every desk in the gas company's gonna have a flag on it."

• Mary Powell, a resident of Greenbriar Nursing Care Center in Woodbury, New Jersey, was a ship fitter during World War II. Sitting at a table and tying yellow ribbons to small paper flags with other residents, she recalled for the camera a magical tradition from that war: "We would have a flag in the window with a star for each boy that was in the service. And then in the middle of the block we had a huge flag. Almost all the blocks in the city did that." Her 90-year-old friend Anna Haines still remembers the flag poem she wrote in 1944, and she recited this segment for the local news:

The white star is guide of the American airplane
 too,
 Guiding our heroes on their way, bringing hopes and
 joy anew.
 And so as the flag is an emblem of everything we love,
 Let us follow its meaning and trust in God above.

In some places multiple traditions of magic were at work. A national television network spent time in Dannebrog, Nebraska, population 227, where the name of the town names the Danish flag, and where the flag that flies over the town to honor its past is not American but Norwegian. In Dannebrog a single Christmas tree on Main Street recalls a distant time in the history of the Scandinavian stock that populates this area when trees were worshipped as the life force embodied. On each branch of this reminder of that tree of life and that time is a small American flag, and to each flag is attached a scrap of paper on which is written a local soldier's name. A sign at the bottom of the tree entreats all who pass by, "Remember our SERVICEMEN OVERSEAS in your prayers."

Carolyn Marvin is Associate Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *When Old Technologies Were New* (Oxford, 1988), and is working on a book about the American flag.