

America is Not a Flag

(Updated: February 22, 2011)

I'm writing this essay in response to the recent outcry over Christina Aguilera's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" at Super Bowl XLV. A vicious torrent of words has been launched at Ms. Aguilera, apparently because (1) at some point she omitted the song's lyrics and/or sang the wrong lyrics, and (2) she sang the song in a manner considered by many to be "untraditional."

Here are some comments posted by readers of the New York Times' Arts Beat page (<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/aguilera-flubs-national-anthem/>):

-An anthem should be performed with a little reverence and respect for the sake of the anthem, not for the sake of the performer. The performer should refrain from embellishment.

-As a retired member of the Army I was totally insulted, embarrassed and [disgusted] with the way that Christina Aguilera destroyed the national anthem at the Super Bowl. Not only did she destroy the melody of the song but she couldn't even remember the correct words. That is an insult to me, to this country and to every member of the military that wears a uniform to defend this country.

-Men have bled to death on the battlefield remembering that refrain, and it comforted them to know that their lives were not sacrificed in vain. That makes it sacred. But Ms. Aguilera couldn't bother to get it right.

And here are some comments from Yahoo News' related article (http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110207/ap_en_ot/us_super_bowl_aguilera):

-She owes the American people an APOLOGY for trashing our national anthem.

-The way she botched it is a disgrace to my sons and all the members of the military who are fighting for this country in the Middle East and have to listen to this crap.

-A complete and utter disgrace to America.

-The fact of the matter is when you are asked to sing the National anthem you represent each and every individual in this country including our soldiers. It is horrible that she didn't take the time to prepare and present and represent this great nation in a way befitting of each of us. It's a football game people; the National anthem is who we are.

-What a self-centered jerk. It is the NATIONAL Anthem not her personal opportunity to embarrass the entire country in front of the rest of the world.

Those are some heavy words to be levied against a person whose only crime was singing a song. Let me advance what I'm sure is going to be considered a very controversial idea: *America is not a song or a flag.*

America is Not a Flag

America is not a flag, no matter how beautiful.
America is not a song, no matter how stirring.
America is not a bird, no matter how majestic.
America is not a line of cars or a brand of tobacco.
And if you're an American who likes
Neither baseball nor apple pie
You're still an American.

America is not a slogan or catchphrase.
America is not a style of clothing
Or a way of talking
Or a particular set of holidays,
Customs or traditions.

America is not a set of borders
Or an area of land.
And should every American move
To the surface of the moon,
America would still exist.

America is *Americans*.
And the Pledge of Allegiance
Should be a pledge
Made directly to your fellow citizens
Instead of to a piece of cloth
Or the word "republic."

America is your neighbors,
Your friends,
Your coworkers and your boss.
It is the person in front of you
In the checkout lane
And the people in the cars
All around you.
It's the hero just back from the war
As well as the criminal who just robbed
An old man at gunpoint.

America is, was, and always will be
*The **people** of America.*
And America is only as strong
Or as weak
As those people.

Flags, songs and birds
Are *symbols* of America.
They are shortcuts that stand for
“The United States of America,”
And while they can be helpful
At the Olympics and sporting events,
They are not necessary
And America would continue to exist
Just fine
Without any of them.

People who hold that these symbols are *sacred*
Are in essence advocating for a *national religion*,
In direct contradiction to the principles
Of freedom of religion and separation of church and state
Held so dearly by our forefathers
And codified in the First Amendment.

America is *a group of people*,
Ideally all working together
For their common good,
Protecting each other
And helping to ensure
Everyone’s right to life, liberty,
And the pursuit of happiness.

And therefore when you burn a piece of cloth,
Or forget the words to a song—
Or sing it in an “untraditional” way—
You do no harm to America;
But when you burn down your neighbors’ houses
Or forget that they have rights and feelings,
Just like you,
You harm America
In the greatest possible way.