

A Blaze of Glory

A One Act Play
by Tom Sadowski

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Cast of Characters

<i>Albert Flagston</i>	<i>American, 50 to 60, mildly eccentric</i>
<i>Charles</i>	<i>Younger American, but over 25, mildly conservative</i>
<i>Woman with Dog</i>	<i>Older lady walking a dog</i>
<i>Policeman</i>	<i>City Policeman</i>
<i>Man2</i>	<i>Younger American</i>

Also:
Joggers and Pedestrians

The Set

The play takes place on a park bench in a lightly traveled section of a city park.

A Blaze of Glory

*Arnold **Flagston** is sitting on a park bench. A second man, **Charles**, occupies the other end of the bench and concentrates on reading his novel. **Flagston** waits. A couple jogs by and then **Flagston** looks about to make sure they are alone. **Flagston** pulls out a small American flag and sets it on fire.*

Flagston *(speaking to himself)*

Oh my, *(eyeing **Charles**)*, he's setting a flag on fire! *(**Charles** tries to ignore him although he is obviously nervous)* I wonder what he's doing... sir, excuse me but I couldn't help noticing that you are burning a flag... *(He waves it around a bit but sees another jogger coming so he quickly puts out the fire and puts the flag away until the jogger passes. He pulls out the remains of the burned flag and re-lights it.)* Oh dear God, he's lighting it again. What could be going through that man's brain? *(The flag finishes burning. **Flagston** fumbles around in his coat and produces a 2nd flag. He looks around to make sure no one is watching and then sets the 2nd flag alight.)*

Charles *(putting away his novel and resigned to conversation)*

I couldn't help but notice...

Flagston

That I was burning a flag? *(He waves the flag around a bit and the flames go out).* Hmm. It's a prototype; a little hard to get started.

Charles

That you were burning a *second* flag...

Flagston

Great ice breaker isn't it?

Charles

Works well with girls?

Flagston

Depends on their political posture.

Charles

I imagine most would find it distasteful...

Flagston

And you? How do you see the situation?

Charles

Well I'm not sure it's such a good idea...

Flagston

A bit irritating?

Charles

More like irreverent.

Flagston

Anti-establishment?

Charles

Anti-patriotic.

Flagston

Ah! But I *am* patriotic.

Charles

Ah! But you're burning our flag.

Flagston

They're not "our flag", they're my flags. I would never burn your flag.

Charles

I don't have a flag.

Flagston

Oh? First you call my flag "our flag" as if you and I owned it together and now you say you don't even own your own flag? Well I own lots of flags. So who's more patriotic?

Charles

A man who burns his own country's flag can not be a patriot.

A Blaze of Glory

Flagston

And how would you define a patriot?

Charles

Someone who loves his country...

Flagston

I love my country very much...

Charles

...and his flag.

Flagston

I love my flags but loving a flag has nothing to do with loving your country.

Charles

The flag symbolizes the country.

Flagston

So I have to love my country *and* the symbol for my country to be a patriot?

Charles (*Speaking mostly to himself*)

Oh great! I was just sitting here sharing a park bench with a stranger...

Flagston

A protester.

Charles

...A protester with a penchant for burning small flags...

Flagston

Penchant. I like that. A protester with a penchant...

Charles

A fondness, if you will, for setting flags on fire.

Flagston

But if you will notice, this protester has a penchant for burning not just any flag but the American flag, the Stars and Stripes: Old Glory itself.

Charles

And you are protesting what?

Flagston

Perception ... Oh excuse me, I'm Arnold Flagston.

Charles

Arnold *Flagston*?

Flagston

Yes, and believe me, the irony here is not lost on Arnold Flagston! Actually, with a name like Flagston, I do a lot of thinking about flags. None the less, as I said, I'm protesting perception. (*He again lights up the partly burned flag*).

Charles

Whose perception?

Flagston

It's the common perception... (*He sees someone coming so he quickly rolls up the burning flag as he produces a tube from his coat. He expertly inserts the rolled up flag into the tube and slips it back under his coat as a couple appear on stage and stroll past. The two are silent until the couple is out of earshot.*)
...the common perception that the flag is important to America. That it somehow is America.

Charles

If you're protesting, then why not in public?

Flagston

I am in public.

Charles

I am just a guy on a bench.

Flagston

A *public* park bench...

Charles

Granted.

Flagston

On public land...

Charles

Yes, but ...

Flagston

A crowd does not make a public scene. I can be at a private party with three hundred people and it wouldn't be in public. It would be a private party.

Charles

But this...

Flagston

But this is public. Public place, public bench, a stranger and me. It's public.

Charles

Well, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Charles...

Flagston

No, no, no, no. You must remain a stranger or it could be construed as a private meeting in court.

Charles

We certainly won't meet in court.

Flagston

The day is still young my friend. No, I'm sorry but I take that back.

Charles

Why? The day *is* still young.

Flagston

I meant I take back calling you my friend.

Charles

Wouldn't be a stranger then?

Flagston

Exactly, can't be too careful.

(He removes the tube from his coat and pulls the rolled up flag from it which is still smoldering. When he waves it around a bit, it bursts back into flame.)

Flagston

I designed it myself. Sort of like the birthday candles you can't blow out. A beautiful thing really. Except it's a little slow to start...

Charles

Indeed. (pauses) So why do I get a private / public protest and not the couple that just passed?

Flagston

I found I can handle just one member of the American public at a time when it comes to flag burning.

Charles

I see.

Flagston

Let me show you a scar. *(He puts the remainder of his flag away).*

Charles

I don't think that's necessary.

Flagston

A little reminder of why I protest to the singular public member and not the public masses...

Charles

No, really...

Flagston

It's a good one –and tangible proof *(he pulls up his shirt as his companion recoils)*. I was protesting to a crowd in Texas when one of them yells "Let's get him". I had no time, nor the opportunity to explain my position to even one patriot who disagreed with my views.

Charles

You wouldn't think a cowboy boot would leave a mark like that.

Flagston

You can just make out the boot logo...

Charles

Where?

Flagston

Right here in the arch; just in front of the heel.

Charles

Tony Lamma. Ouch!

Flagston

After that incident I decided to limit my protests to one member of the public at any one time. *(He pauses)*. So have you ever burned a flag?

Charles

Oh no, no...

Flagston

Not even at some wild anti war protest during your college days?

Charles

No, never torched one. *(Another awkward pause)*. Well I did burn one for my grandmother once.

Flagston

Ah! So am I preaching to the choir here? I don't have enough time or flags to be preaching to the choir.

Charles

The flag was torn up in a windstorm; worn out. She asked me to burn it out of respect.

Flagston

So you burn flags out of respect and I burn them out of...?

Charles

...Disrespect?

Flagston *(As he produces another flag from a special tube in his coat)*.

No not disrespect. I for one, respect the flag for what it is: a symbol of our great nation, conceived in liberty, land where our fathers died, from the redwood forests to the New York islands, the home of the brave, with spacious skies from sea to shining sea. I love America! So you see, no disrespect at all... well ok, disrespect, but a healthy disrespect: not for what the flag represents but for the ignorance and myopia that make people believe that this, *(he gestures to the flag)*... this is anything.

Charles

Well it represents America.

Flagston

Mom, apple pie, Hollywood, all represent America but Mother can be a vulgarity, apple pie is sodomized in the movies; movies that Hollywood produces and no one says anything. But light up a flag...

(He puts a lighter to the flag and ignites it. It burns fast and hot. Charles snatches the flag from Flagston and waves it about to put it out. Woman Walking Dog enters.)

Woman with Dog

(Dog barks, both men turn) Young man, what are you doing to that flag?

Charles

(Waving the burning flag madly) I am trying to put this fire out. *(Looking at Flagston with anger)* We've burned enough flags today haven't we?

(Flagston looks at woman and shrugs.)

Woman with Dog

I'll say you have. *(She and her dog storm off stage and exit)*

Flagston

Now you've done it, you went and involved the public.

Charles

Enough is enough. You can't sit here torching one flag after another and have me watch. That would just be un-American. *(Still waving the flag about)*. Why isn't this flag going out?

Flagston

Ah! That's because you're not really burning the flag.

Charles

What?

(Flagston grabs the flag from him, rolls it expertly and inserts it back into the special tube. The fire is extinguished.)

Flagston

This is a special design where the actual flag technically doesn't burn.

Charles

It doesn't burn?

Flagston

A liquid fuel is wicked onto the flag from the staff and it's really the fuel burning and not the flag. My own design; Sort of a combination of free speech and the eternal flame... It illustrates the fact that you can't even define flag burning to the satisfaction of the courts. *(They look at each other in disbelief)*. It'll burn almost 5 minutes without scorching the flag. Well, 3 minutes actually, depending on the retardant and other things...

Charles

You sir are some kind of a pathetic pyro-patriotic psychotic and you need help.

Flagston

I have reason and I have deductive thinking and I need help because it is inconsistent with your schoolchild emotional values? (*He shakes his head in disbelief while producing another, larger flag from his coat. Charles immediately snatches it away.*)

Charles

(*Getting up to leave*) No! You're not going to torch another American flag. My objections may be emotional and childish but they're what this country is built on and we just don't burn American flags in America.

Flagston

Hold on there. Would you have objections to burning a Cuban flag?

Charles

Some people would.

Flagston

And you?

Charles

I ... suppose not.

Flagston

A North Korean flag?

Charles

I guess not... so what?

Flagston

Well how about a fake flag; one that doesn't really belong to anyone.

Charles

Burn as many of those as you like.

Flagston

Well, that's a fake flag. (*Pointing to the one Charles snatched away and is still holding.*)

Charles

This is a real flag.

Flagston

No it isn't.

Charles

Yes it is.

Flagston

No it isn't.

Charles

It's a real American flag.

Flagston

If it was a real American Flag it would have 13 stripes representing the 13 original colonies but that flag only has 12 stripes.

Charles

12 Stripes? (*He quickly counts the stripes*).

Flagston

So... it's not a real American flag. What's your beef?

Charles

This *was* a real American flag and you desecrated it by ripping off one of the stripes!

Flagston

Whoa. Desecrated?

Charles

Yes desecrated.

Flagston

Now that is some word. How is it used normally? You can desecrate a body, or you can desecrate something religious, or you can desecrate a flag.

Charles

Absolutely.

Flagston

So we are putting a piece of cloth on par with human bodies and religious items?

Charles

That's how strongly people feel about it.

Flagston

But why?

Charles

Because people love America and the flag represents America and when you burn the flag it's like telling everybody you'd like to destroy America so if you want to destroy America you should just get out.

Flagston

OK. What if I don't want to destroy America? What if I just want to show the people in China and Cuba and North Korea that we have so much freedom in America that we can burn our own flag and it's no big deal? Don't you think they would stand back and say "Now that's real freedom"? Maybe they'd stop burning the American flag in the Middle East all the time if they found out it doesn't get our blood pressure up.

Charles

Well it does get our blood pressure up because we're Americans!

Flagston

Answer me this: if all the American flags suddenly disappeared, if you woke up one morning and all the American flags were gone, would this still be America?

Charles

Sure it would.

Flagston

So the flag doesn't make America.

Charles

No, but it symbolizes America.

Flagston

But it's not America. It's not liberty. It's not owning a home -or mom at Christmas making apple pies -or going to the mall and buying anything you want -or not having the government throw you in prison for going to church. The flag is not having a gun at home or being a woman who can vote -and it's not having a court you can go to if the president himself is screwing the country.

Charles *(slowly)*

No, but it symbolizes all those things for people who can't say it as well as you do. It lets people who can't say it, say what you just said with just a wave of the wrist... It speaks for America.

(They pause a long while to study each other)

Flagston

Well, you had me listening there. You have a point. And I was gonna give it to you but then you said it speaks for America? It doesn't speak for America. It's a piece of cloth.

(He looks longingly at the flag Charles took from him.)

Charles

No, if you're just going to burn it you can't have it back.

Flagston

All right, let's backtrack a bit. You said that if all the flags magically disappeared overnight this would still be America in the morning.

Charles

Not in so many words, but yes.

Flagston

So if the flag doesn't make a nation, what does?

Charles

Well there's the states, and Washington... what do you mean?

Flagston

What makes up America? What is the one thing we have that if it suddenly disappeared, we wouldn't have an America?

Charles

I guess it's the American people

Flagston

No, it's not the American People!

Charles

Well if we all disappeared you wouldn't have an America.

Flagston

Well of course we have to have people. We have to have oxygen and sunshine and gravity and food but every country has got to have those things. What is it that America has that if it loses it, it won't be America any more?

Charles

Republicans?

Flagston

Hmm. Ok, I admit that it just wouldn't be the same here without republicans but I'm looking for something deeper; the one thing, the glue that keeps us together and makes us Americans...

Charles

Uh... we have laws...

Flagston (*probing for the right answers*)

And where do these laws come from?

Charles

Washington?

Flagston

And what is it in Washington that these laws ultimately come from?

Charles

The legislature.

Flagston

And where does the legislature get the authority to make these laws?

Charles

The American people.

Flagston

The American people... And what gives the American people the authority to give the legislature the authority to make the laws?

Charles

...The... Constitution?

Flagston

Yes! And the Constitution is...

Charles

I don't know, in Philadelphia?

Flagston

It's an agreement! The Constitution is an agreement and a set of rules. All Americans agree, in one way or another, to live by the rules set out in the Constitution.

Charles

We all agree?

Flagston

It's this agreement among Americans that makes us American! If this agreement fell apart overnight there would be no America. If we had no Constitution –no rules to agree upon, then we might have something else but it wouldn't be America.

Charles

OK. You made your point.

Flagston

Not finished yet. If we, you and I, agree on the rules provided in the Constitution, then we would agree that we have a right to own property because the Constitution is big on property rights. The government can't just come in and take our property without due process, etc., etc., because through the Constitution we agree to respect each other's property rights.

Charles

So?

Flagston

So who's more patriotic, the guy who owns many American flags to express his first amendment rights in any way he sees fit –me-, or the guy who owns no flags except for the one he stole from me because he doesn't respect his countryman's constitutionally given right to own property?

(a long pause)

Charles

Alright, here's your damn flag.

Flagston

(Taking the flag back) Now it's a "Damned" flag. If you insist on using the word damn then you must say that it's a damned fine flag representing the best damned nation on earth!

Charles

That's not even a real flag; it's only got 12 stripes. You said so yourself.

Flagston

But it's close enough for most Americans to be a symbol – a symbol of the genuine symbol of our great nation. You can draw a flag with green crayon on a yellow paper and still upset people when you burn it because Americans are too lazy to take the time to do the logic and understand the reasoning behind flag burning.

Charles

And that be ...?

Flagston

First, the flag doesn't matter to the existence of America –a flag isn't even mentioned in the Constitution- and second, if you take away a man's right to express himself through burning his country's flag you're just chipping away at the very rights given to us by our Constitution -which is really what makes America. Do you understand me? You are chiseling away at the real foundations of America in order to save its symbol. How dumb is that?

Charles

But it's the flag...

Flagston

I know it's a hard concept for the average American. It's like math class: nobody likes math because you have to think. But think it through. Think. Apply yourself! (*He pauses to see if Charles is thinking. Charles stares at him perplexed.*) Oh... we should have a national flag burning holiday where all the children run around once a year a burning flags with sparklers to show the world and ourselves that it's not the cloth that keeps us together but the concept and the ideals of this nation.

(Flagston lights up the flag but Charles jumps on Flagston to save the flag)

Charles

No! Give me that flag!

(A scuffle ensues. Flagston manages to keep the flag and to get it burning hot before Charles finally snatches it away. Woman with dog returns; enters from behind accompanied by Policeman. Charles waves it in the air trying to put it out to no avail.)

Charles

(Angrily, not seeing Policeman and Woman) Oh, we got it burning good this time!

Woman with dog

Officer, the man with the flag, that's the one!

Policeman

Hey buddy! Yo, flag-burner!

(Charles Sees Policeman, throws flag on ground and stomps out remaining flames.)

Whoa, easy on the flag... *(Policeman grabs Charles)*

Charles

Hey, it's him not me. *(He struggles, still angry. Jogging couple stop to watch action and another pedestrian – Man2- also enters to watch the commotion).*

Policeman

Whoa there... There's an ordinance against flag burning.

Charles

I wasn't burning... That wasn't a real American flag... *(Pointing at Flagston)* That's the raving lunatic flag burner there... Check his coat...

Flagston

(Looking innocent) I tried to change his mind but he got very angry...

Charles

You patriotic bastard!

(He lunges at Flagston but the Policeman in one swift motion stops Charles and puts him in handcuffs).

Stop it. Hey! This is a setup. I'm not the one...

Policeman

Quiet down and come along. You can explain all this down at the station.

(Policeman, reciting Charles his rights, and Charles, still complaining, exit -followed by Woman with dog and two joggers. Flagston sits back down on the bench and Man2 sits down to accompany him).

Man2

Did you see what happened?

Flagston

Not exactly sure. One of those park characters I guess...

Man2

Wow, this is some view.

(They sit quietly for a while. Flagston pulls out a small American flag and sets it on fire. Man2 takes notice but remains silent.)

Flagston

Oh my, *(eyeing Man2)*, he's setting a flag on fire! *(Man2 tries to ignore him although he is obviously nervous)* I wonder what he's doing... sir, excuse me but I couldn't help noticing that you are burning a flag...

Curtain.

Please contact the author to arrange any public performance.
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