

Introduction  
by Wayne Fields



13-Star U.S. Flag,  
About 1845 – 1850

# Indivisible

*A speech given at the opening of the exhibit The American Flag: Two Centuries of Concord & Conflict, at the Presidio’s Officers Club in San Francisco, California, January 12, 2003.*

The founding fathers defined one of the most complicated plot lines that was ever assigned to a people to enact and to explore, and they did it in ways which I don’t think they fully understood or to some extent ever hoped would work out successfully. They had a kind of simple but contradictory commitment that a people could somehow be both one and many. We carry that motto around on our coins—so convinced are we of its sacred nature—that says we are, somehow simultaneously, *plura* and *unum*.

The founders were not calling on us, as the leaders of other nations had, to become one from what had been many or to break apart and become many from what had been one. The plot line they designed was one in which we would be one and many *at the same time*. That we would somehow be able, as the Declaration of Independence insists, to define ourselves out of a fiercely suspicious nature built around our notion that individual rights take the highest priority and our commitment to affection as made in the opening line of the Constitution that *we the people*—and not the states, as the Confederation had imagined it—*we the people* are committed to a more perfect union.

The tension between those two parts of our heritage is acted out in the flag. The story that we see in the stripes and the stars is about the aspiration (and, often enough, about our failure to obtain it), to somehow carry that story forward into the demands of our own time. No design firm in America would come up with this flag. You can hear the criticisms—It’s much too busy. Rectangles inside rectangles?—I don’t think so! Stars next to stripes? And those colors! The busyness of it is because it is trying to retain the multiplicity of America in a single symbol. The fact that it has constantly been changing on us, reforming itself with the addition of states, and (I would argue) that through those same statements of transformation, changing in terms of the addition of cultures, addition of rights, addition of understanding of one another. All this has been extraordinary testimony to the persistence of an idea that, according to conventional wisdom, now as much as in the time of the founders, simply will not work.

As we see more and more how the new republics that were formed after the fall of the Soviet Union become increasingly convinced that only communities of likeness can be one, that only communities in which difference has been eliminated can be successful as communities, we begin to understand the depth of the importance of our struggle with this story line and also the extraordinary commitment it has taken to carry it this far and to move it ahead.

I will skip any elaboration of that beyond saying that the place where I find it most interestingly expressed was in the recent exposure that we’ve had in the excitement of flags in the aftermath of 9/11 when they were flying everywhere and commentary

was being written about that display of patriotism in every major city of the United States.

I was not in a major city most of that time. I was traveling around a part of rural Missouri and southern Iowa where very few people or media and politicians go by the farms. Very few of those farms are prospering now, yet a group of people that has become as impoverished and as marginalized as many people in our inner cities had flags flying there for nobody in particular to see, since nobody in particular ever drove by those farms.

One of them happened to be the farm of an acquaintance of mine. I asked him—a very crotchety man who makes me look pleasant by contrast—why he had done this, since he literally lives on a road that nobody else takes. What he tried to explain was that for him it wasn’t a sign of defiance. He didn’t expect any Al-Qaeda to suddenly jump up in a soybean field. It was the only way he had of showing solidarity with the people that he had never seen before but considered his countrymen. He has never been to New York, has no aspiration to go to New York, and wouldn’t care much for New York if he ever got there. But New Yorkers were for him, like the rest of his more immediate dysfunctional family, people that were to be cared for and loved in spite of himself and in spite of themselves.

The flag has become not something we just say to the rest of the world. The flag is something we say to one another—and in my friend’s case, to himself—about the deepest and profoundest commitments that make us a people. We understand that the symbol of our unity is also the symbol of our exclusion in crucial moments. It is tremendously important to go back and look at photographs of domestic strife, domestic

demonstrations in every generation, to see that the flag is always there. That the suffragettes are waving it at the beginning of the century, that it leads the demonstrations at Selma and at Montgomery, that there is a constant effort to claim it in its fullest and most inclusive terms by people who have often been excluded in every other statement of who we are.

For me the great loss—and I have a jaundiced view of this because when “one nation under God” was added I had been saying the Pledge of Allegiance in school for about ten years already and had to learn it again or look like an idiot every time if I did not put in “under God”—was this: as important as that phrase was which the Baptist minister who wrote the original Pledge of Allegiance did not see the need for, the word it shouldered aside was *indivisible*.

Whatever God has to do with us and thinks of us, our security and real strength is only as great as our commitment to one another, and only so much as we believe that in some important way these diverse people that we have come to live among are people who can make us feel more secure and more at home than people who might be precisely like us. We are *indivisible* and we *are* indivisible because of a commitment to law and to justice and to each other.

This to me is the national story that the founders began to write but of course never imagined anybody finishing, at least not with a happy ending. This is the story that the flag contains in some important way. It is the story whose latest chapter depends upon what we write and whether we find it possible to write it together or whether we finally despair and let the story end.

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