EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

July 18, 2001

If they are destroying a flag that belongs to someone else, that’s a prosecutable crime. If it is a flag they own, I really don’t want to amend the Constitution to prosecute someone for foolishly desecrating their own property. We should condemn them and pity them instead.

I understand how strongly so many of my fellow veterans and citizens feel about the flag and I understand the powerful sentiment in state legislatures for such an amendment. I feel the same sense of outrage. But I step back from amending the Constitution to resolve that outrage. Congress must instead use those powers that exist to make our system of freedom which tolerates such acts possible. It is powerful to inspire us and our children to honor the flag is proof of the strength of our nation. If we forsake the very freedoms that the flag symbolizes, we have lost the very thing we are trying to protect.

For over two hundred years, the Bill of Rights of our Constitution has been the cornerstone of our great nation and the source of our basic freedoms and rights. Our democracy has withstood many tests of our freedoms, and has been strengthened as a result. The occasional, random, desppicable acts of public desecration of our flag present another such test.

The American flag is a symbol for liberty and justice, for freedom of speech and expression and all of the other rights we cherish. But as important as the symbol may be, more important are the ideals and principles which the symbol represents. That our nation can tolerate desecration and even disrespect for our flag is proof of the strength of our nation. If we amend our Bill of Rights to protect the flag we would forsake the very freedoms that the flag symbolizes.

On May 18, 1999, General Colin Powell, who has dedicated his life to serving our country, sent a letter to Senator Patrick Leahy sharing his reasons for opposing this constitutional amendment. Senator Leahy entered that letter in to the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD on March 29, 2000. The text of this poignant and thought-provoking letter is attached.

I love our country, I love our flag—and the principles for which it stands. By voting against this proposed amendment, we vote for the rights and freedoms that make our country great and distinguish our country from virtually every other country in the world.

GEN. COLIN L. POWELL, USA (Ret.),

Hon. Patrick Leahy,
U.S. Senate,
Washington, DC.

Dear Senator Leahy: Thank you for your recent letter asking my views on the proposed flag protection amendment.

I love our flag, our Constitution and our country with a love that has no bounds. I defended all three for 33 years as a soldier and was willing to give my life in their defense.

Americans revere their flag as a symbol of the Nation. Indeed, it is because of that reverence that the amendment is under consideration. Few countries in the world would think of amending their Constitution for the purpose of protecting such a symbol.

We are rightfully outraged when anyone attacks or desecrates our flag. Few Americans do such things and when they do they are subject to the rightful condemnation of their fellow citizens. They may be destroying a piece of fabric, but they are committing an act of damage to our system of freedom which tolerates such desecration.

One can teach these ideas, even in a Communist prison camp. Marxists believe that ideas are merely the product of material conditions; change those material conditions, and one will change the ideas they produce. They tried to ‘‘re-educate’’ us. If we could show them that we would not abandon our belief in fundamental principles, then we could prove the falseness of their doctrine. We could show them what freedom means in our system of freedom which tolerates such acts.

I did not appreciate this power before I was a prisoner of war. I remember one interrogation when I was shown a photograph of some Americans protesting the war by burning a flag in Dallas. ‘‘What will you do if they try to burn a flag in your country? What will you do against that?’’ I was willing to give my life in their defense. I love our country with a love that has no bounds. I defend those who would. For or against, we all love our flag with equal devotion.

Sincerely,

COLIN L. POWELL, USA (Ret.)

In March of 1973, when we were released from a prisoner of war camp in North Vietnam, we were flown to Clark Air Force base in the Philippines. As I stepped out of the aircraft I looked up and saw the flag. I caught my breath, then, as tears filled my eyes, I saluted it. I never loved my country more than at that moment. Although I have received the Silver Star Medal and twoPurple Hearts, they were nothing compared with the gratitude I felt then for having been allowed to serve the cause of freedom.

Because the mere sight of the flag meant so much to me when I saw it for the first time after 5½ years, it hurts me to see other Americans deliberately defile it. But I have been in a Communist prison where I looked into the pit of hell. I cannot compromise on freedom. It hurts to see the flag burned, but I am not afraid to punish those who want to punish the flag burners. Let me explain myself.

Early in the imprisonment the Communists told us that we did not have to stay there. If we would only admit we were wrong, if we would only apologize, we could be released early. If we did not, we would be punished. A handful accepted, most did not. In our minds, early release under those conditions would amount to a betrayal of our comrades of our country and of our flag.

Because I knew the words they wanted us to say, they made our lives wretched. Most of us were tortured, and some of my comrades died. I was tortured for most of the summer of 1969. I developed beri-beri from malnutrition. I had long bouts of diarrhea from malnutrition. I had long bouts of diarrhea. I was released under those conditions.

The flag in Dallas was burned to protest the nomination of Ronald Reagan, and he told us how the Athenians protested the war by burning a flag to protest the war. I believe that free Americans could show them the power of ideas. We could subvert them by teaching them about freedom through our example. We could show them the power of ideas.

In that speech, recorded in the Second Book of Thucydides ‘‘History of the Peloponnesian War,’’ Pericles contrasted democratic Athens with totalitarian Sparta. Unlike, the Spartans, he said, the Athenians did not fear freedom. Rather, they viewed freedom as the very source of their strength. As it was for Athens, so is it for America—our freedom is not to be feared, but our freedom is our strength.

We don’t need to amend the Constitution in order to punish those who burn our flag. They burn the flag because they hate America and they are afraid of freedom. What better way to hurt them than with the subversive idea of freedom? Spread freedom. The picture of the burning flag, against the American flag, is a powerful tool. It could show them the power of ideas.

IN HONOR OF REVEREND THOMAS C. McKinley’s ACHIEVEMENTS

HON. PETER J. VISCOSKY
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, July 18, 2001

Mr. VISCOSKY. Mr. Speaker, it is my honor to congratulat an individual who found his spiritual calling, and was able to overcome many obstacles to help his community and to make life better for the citizens of Indiana’s First Congressional District. Reverend Thomas C. McKinley, pastor of Gary’s Missionary Baptist Church, has been honored this Friday, July 20, 2001, at the Twentieth Century Missionary Baptist Church for earning his diploma of academic achievement from the State of Indiana.