

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

THIS ISSUE OF *California History* addresses a core American tradition: controversy. As Americans, we excel at arguing, often vehemently, among ourselves. The level of vitriol can skyrocket in times of national stress, as in the middle of the twentieth century, when protesters marched for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. Today's conflicts over murals and monuments prompt us to ask: How should we deal with public memorials that, some argue, celebrate shameful aspects of the American experience? For example: Confederate statues—up or down? Statues of Confederate generals and murals of George Washington—moral equivalents? Pioneer monuments—acceptable or inherently offensive? Neo-Nazi chants—free speech, protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, or unprotected “fighting words,” which, by their very utterance, “inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace”?<sup>1</sup>

These questions take me back to the heady days of 1974, the year Johnny Cash recorded “Ragged Old Flag.”<sup>2</sup> At first hearing, listeners might have assumed the song was an uncritical “my country, right or wrong” sort of patriotic anthem. Its lyrics recount battles that our flag has endured, from Saratoga to Shiloh, Belleau Wood to Midway, Pyongyang to the Tet Offensive. But the timing of the recording raises questions. What did Cash mean when he sang that the flag had been “scandalized”? “Hawks,” or supporters of American involvement in Vietnam, perhaps assumed he meant that antiwar protesters were dishonoring the Stars and Stripes. “Doves,” opposed to American militarism in Indochina, might have heard Cash lamenting the Watergate crisis, which led to an impeachment inquiry and ultimately the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon. Both would have been correct. I like to imagine that jukebox renditions of the song prompted heated arguments between truckers and flower children in roadside diners, and that maybe, just maybe, as dishes and coffee cups were cleared and as each went on their way, the exchanges led to private musings that maybe, just maybe, the other side had a glimmer of a point.

Here is the value that knowing our history can bring to our perennial flare-ups of political bickering and backbiting. To paraphrase historian Jon Meacham (whose 2019 book with Tim McGraw, *Songs of America: Patriotism, Protest, and the Music That Made a Nation*, is reviewed in this issue), “history has the capacity to create more productive conversations.” When we understand our own historical moment, or when we understand the historical context in which, for example, a country music legend recorded a

---

*California History*, Vol. 97, Number 1, pp. 1–2, ISSN 0162-2897, electronic ISSN 2327-1485. © 2020 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2020.97.1.1>

patriotic song, “it gives us a sense of proportion.”<sup>3</sup> A sense of proportion is surely useful in our own contentious times.

As Americans, it is our right, our privilege, even our duty to engage one another, passionately but civilly, when we disagree, even if we do so vehemently—perhaps especially when we do so vehemently. Silencing legitimate discourse is the opposite. Whatever our founders’ flaws—and they were legion—we live up to their faith in us when we argue for all we are worth.

MARY ANN IRWIN

#### NOTES

1. Quoting the U.S. Supreme Court in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568 (1942).
2. Listen to the recording: “Johnny Cash - Ragged Old Flag (Audio),” YouTube, February 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfzJ8UBr-co> (accessed December 4, 2019).
3. Jon Meacham, speaking on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, NBC, June 11, 2019.