

# FORMER TEACHER ARRESTED FOR BURNING U.S. FLAGS

## The Civic Responsibility and Consciousness of War

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**K**iss the flag? Burn the flag? Support the troops? Stop the war? If you want to know why former school teacher and fitness coach Doug Wight went on a flag burning spree just before Christmas, maybe you should ask him. It seems that few people have done that. Newspaper articles that appeared presented few details.

Wight was in court on January 24, and his trial is set for April. The Associated Press filed the first news articles on the morning of Christmas Eve. “Anarchist Group Behind Local Flag Burning,” read the banner headline. “Police say a flag-burning incident in Northampton may be the work of an anti-American anarchist group,” the story began.[\[1\]](#)

It was not an anarchist group, not an anarchist, and it was not anti-American. It was only Doug Wight, a former public school teacher and patriotic citizen spurred to action by a combination of frustration, outrage and conscience.

Doug Wight is the primary suspect in four flag related incidents in the weeks just prior to Christmas 2007. But contrary to what most people believe, three of the five flags destroyed were on Federal Property. The flag at the Greenfield (MA) Post Office was lowered off the pole and burned in a dumpster. Two flags on the highway overpass above the Massachusetts Turnpike in Palmer (MA) were burned on December 7. One flag was taken from someone’s yard and a note left to say it would be burned. The fifth flag was burned where it hung from a tree outside someone’s home.

“A man police have linked to four vandalism incidents around the Pioneer Valley said he felt called to burn American flags as a way to draw public attention to what he sees as abuses of power by the U.S. government,” the Greenfield Recorder began on December 27, 2007.

The story is not as simple as it would appear, much to the dismay and celebration of those both for and against what Doug Wight did, and the important points of consideration have been swept away with the ashes of the flags. As usual, the media and the news-consuming public have distilled a very complex and intriguing story down to a collection of sound bites and jingoisms.

Doug Wight gave an interview to the local Daily Hampshire Gazette newspaper several hours before his arrest. He said he hoped his actions would inspire others to take a critical look at the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which he says are illegal, and other policies of the Bush administration, like the USA PATRIOT ACT, which he says violates the Constitution.

“I felt called, as a kind of duty and responsibility,” Wight told the Gazette, “to try and wake up the American people in any way I can without harming or hurting them. If I have to go to jail and suffer to help put an end to these state-sponsored atrocities and abuses, so be it. Such is the price of true liberty!”

News of Doug Wight’s arrest prompted yahoo reactions from all sides. Some people extrapolate from the string of flag desecrations that Wight is a terrorist, a menace to society and an anti-war radical who should be tried for treason. Others believe that Wight is himself a symbol of freedom and courage that the United States is meant to stand for. Some peace activists complained about his tactics.

“Why would a 65 year-old man, a former public school teacher, high school coach, health and fitness consultant, and YMCA Director, decide that he must start burning American flags?” Doug Wight wrote in explanation of his actions. “I felt it was time I stepped up some tough action that would incite, anger, arouse, and hopefully move some Americans to take stock of the values and principles our country is actually representing.”

My reasons for writing this story are many. The citizens of the United States are hardly able to communicate about diverse and difficult issues to come to some agreement about truths underlying the real problems we face as communities and people.

Most people believe they have a right to say or do this or that, but they are quick to deny the same rights to others when others try to say or do something they don’t agree with. This tendency plays out in public spaces, in issues of freedom of speech and press.

Freedom of Speech is the right for you to say something that I don’t want to hear and for me to say something you don’t want to hear. It is not the right to silence those with whom we disagree, as much as we all—including myself—would sometimes like to do that. One is freedom, the other is fascism. People are confused about the difference.

## **FLAGS OVER YONDER**

Many flag displays have been erected in public spaces across the United States. In Massachusetts there are a lot of displays on highways structures and bridge overpasses.

One incident attributed to Doug Wight involves two flags that were part of a huge “patriotic” display on the overpass bridge above Interstate I-90, the Massachusetts Turnpike, in Palmer, MA. By late November, the Mass Pike overpass—and others across the state—were adorned with as many as 12 flags, each about 3 x 5 feet, and there were scores of little U.S. flags on sticks.

On December 4, 2007, the Massachusetts Highway Department issued an order to workers to remove American flags and other patriotic tributes on highway overpasses. State officials said they are concerned the flags and signs could fall on drivers, causing an accident. The state did not have a planned time line to enforce the ban, but Mass Highway indicated that workers would be removing the flags and anything else hanging over bridges and overpasses in upcoming weeks.[\[2\]](#)

“It has nothing to do with safety,” said James Wareing, quoted by the Boston Globe. Wareing was reported as the leader of a military support group in Methuen, MA, who assembled and maintains a display dedicated to Alex Jimenez, a U.S. Army specialist kidnapped in Iraq. “Nothing has ever happened in six years.”

If it was a peace display that Mass Highway was threatening to remove, many peace activists would make the same claim: “It has nothing to do with safety.”

The Boston Globe reported that James Weiring invited Alex’s father, Andy Jimenez, to help him take down their display before highway workers could dismantle it. The display “is good for me,” Jimenez was quoted to say, “because, I don’t feel alone.” The Globe reported that Jimenez’ son’s unit was ambushed south of Baghdad in May. “Now I have to pull it down. I don’t know why.”

Any compassionate American would share in the sadness and concerns of a man like Andy Jimenez losing his son. (The Boston Globe didn’t offer any information about Alex Jimenez, just that his unit was ambushed in May.) However, to quote Jimenez saying “I don’t know why” is to disingenuously suggest confusion, rather than legality and public safety. Jimenez is accountable as the rest of us are for understanding citizen responsibility.

The Boston Globe took a biased position by presenting the case of a U.S. soldier purportedly kidnapped, and invoking readers’ sympathetic feelings to the U.S. soldier’s father, and to his son, the U.S. soldier. If the Boston Globe were to take a neutral position they would seek out comments from the men who are losing sons in the wars where the U.S. is fighting. Mothers and fathers from Afghanistan and Iraq are also distraught about losing children in war. Also, the Boston Globe did not seek out anyone who disagreed with the patriotic displays on the bridge, only those who agreed with it. In a whole series of articles there is not one dissenting opinion.

It is important to call out the bias involved in the reporting and slanting of these news stories. This bias is also practiced by the general population whenever passion and fear—rather than truth and reason—rule over personal interests. In my experience, and there is plenty of evidence to support my contention, no one would be allowed to decorate any Federal property with political materials—such as peace flags or peace “tributes”—that do not fulfill the war effort’s criterion of “appropriate” displays. There is a very clear public bias in favor of what some people consider “appropriate” and against others whose beliefs and values differ.

However, when Mass Highway Commissioner Luisa Paiewonsky said that the new edict applies to all signs on bridges over highways, she was not singling out people who would like to express their patriotism by constructing memorials to the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, but rather applying some kind of reasonable standard about public safety.

“It neither singles out patriotic displays, nor makes an exception for them,” she said. “The state doesn’t want anything—flags, sheets, signs—hanging over a major roadway for safety reasons,” the Boston Globe continued, noting “that Erik Abell, Massachusetts Highway spokesman, said the state is concerned about the safety of drivers.”

Of course, the December 4 edict by the Mass Highway department that forbade “patriotic tributes” and flag displays—and peace signs and rock-star banners and whatever else somebody might decide to post in public spaces—was upsetting to the people who put up the displays.

Public fury by a select group of people led to an immediate reversal order issued by the Governor’s office. On December 5, Mass Governor Deval Patrick overturned the Mass Highway edict and declared that the flag displays could remain.[\[3\]](#)

The Boston Globe reported this but did not report that people do not agree with the Governor’s dictatorial action. Instead they reported that people were pleased their displays would stay.

Is the Mass Highway department against the war effort? I doubt it. However, as more and more people in the U.S. are seeing the damage the wars are doing to this country it may be that the Mass Highway and other state officials have also had enough of it.

Be it pro-war or anti-war or pro-peace or anti-peace or pro-life or pro-choice, where do the rights of those who wish to display their cherished symbols in Federal and state and other public spaces infringe upon the rights of those whose beliefs differ?

Thousands of cars daily wish under the Mass Pike overpass and each is treated to the spectacle of someone’s version of patriotism displayed across the sky above them. None of these commuters has any say in how their personal space is impacted, but that is of little concern to many people in the country, who feel it is their right and duty to publicly show their support for the war by decking concrete overpasses with the red white and blue. The false assumption is that everyone agrees with it. They don’t. More and more people disagree.

If neo-Nazis choose to put up swastikas will people complain? Will the Governor overrule the people if he happens to believe that Swastikas are perfectly fine? What about Confederate Flags? Or pro-choice banners? Or nooses hanging from sticks? Or gay rights flags?

The crux of the issue is that those who display their flags on public property don’t care how it impacts me or anyone else. Indeed, we as a society suffer from a great lack of caring, and believe that we have the right to impose our will on others. In local terms, this is just an extension of the war, by U.S. citizens against U.S. citizens. The Governor’s action is the most flagrant example of an abuse of power, but for those who approve of his abuse it is nothing of the kind. This time.

On December 7, at about 9:30 pm, two of the twelve large United States flags on the Palmer overpass of the Massachusetts Turn Pike were ignited and melted to a crisp. A silver pick-up truck was spotted leaving the scene. The flags were made of a cheap plastic material and they all said “Made in China” on them.

While the newspapers carried stories celebrating the construction of the flag displays on the Mass Pike, none reported that some flags were burned. Does the public have a right to know that someone is burning flags? Should the public be informed? Is that “news”?

### **FLAGS FOR THE WAR**

For most Americans “Old Glory” is the ultimate symbol of American freedom, truth and liberty. According to what is now a long history of burning the American flag, those who choose to do so are afforded protection under the 1989 Supreme Court decision protecting their fundamental rights and freedoms of speech.

Is the state contesting Doug Wight’s free speech flag burning rights? In the case of the two privately owned flags on private property they are charging him with private property violations. With the other three cases it’s not clear: the flags were on Federal or state property.

Joyce Doody, executive director of the National Flag Foundation, and her organization, a so-called “nonprofit flag education organization” based in Pittsburgh, gets a lot of press promoting patriotism—centered around the U.S. flag—through all kinds of paraphernalia and programs.

According to Doody and her “education” organization, the U.S. flag is a symbol of the sacrifices made to preserve the liberties and ideals behind the founding of the country. “It’s not a partisan or political symbol,” Doody is quoted to say. “And it is not an appropriate vehicle for demonstrations for or against an issue.”

The idea that the American flag is “not a partisan or political symbol” is ridiculous. If the U.S. Congress successfully overturns the free-speech flag-waving protections—as it has sought to do just about every year since 1989—then an awful lot of Americans are going to need to be arrested and tried for using the U.S. flag as an “inappropriate vehicle for demonstrations for or against an issue.”

The National Flag Foundation is a private organization that promotes state laws mandating school “education” programs about “flag etiquette” and “good citizenship” and “free enterprise.” This is where the flag is used as a tool of indoctrination. The organization uses the flag to promote an issue—“good” citizenship—but such definitions are very subjective.

According to the Doody statement above, the organization is itself guilty of using the flag as a partisan and political tool. They just pretend that it isn’t so. By their interpretation, Doug Wight is a “bad” citizen, as is anyone who disagrees with their selective programs.

### **PASSIONS FLYING HIGH**

Everyone reading this story knows what it means to have an irrational reaction: How many people have had some kind of very strong reaction to this story already? That is the place to begin learning about one’s self. The burning of the American flag is an incendiary act. It affronts some peoples’ deepest, most cherished beliefs. The irrational part is the part of ourselves that we find we are unable to control or confront.

It is by examining the strong, burning sensations that arise inside our bodies that we are given the opportunity to grow, to be better people, to become part of the solution and not remain part of the problem. That is how we will find our collective way through the complex and chaotic and, for many people, very frightening world around us.

But America is deeply disturbed. People of all walks of life hold deep and sacred beliefs that are generally not open to discussion. Most of us struggle with the question of the sanctity of our beliefs. It is because of deeply held beliefs that we individually and often collectively consider “not open to negotiation” that we often find ourselves unable to communicate with each other, unable to find the common ground we share with our neighbors, our communities, and people everywhere.

Americans are hungry for truth, for leadership, for a strong and independent country. No one can deny this. Part of the reason we are so quickly “offended” by other people’s actions and other people’s words is that we often have no idea how to navigate within the world in which we have found ourselves. For many people this leads to deep and very real fears and frustrations, which often quickly overwhelm common sense.

Everyone knows that the American flag is flown all over the place as a symbol of support for the U.S. government and its’ policies. Especially since 9/11, displays of the U.S. flag have become pervasive throughout the culture and most Americans will readily acknowledge that flag flying is an action to publicly express support for the United States’ war effort. Anyone who doubts this needs only to look back at the photographs of Germany, 1936-1944, to refresh their minds about flags, nationalism and state power.[\[4\]](#)

Back to the flags on the Mass Pike overpass, by what right do a handful of townspeople decide they are going to determine state or Federal policy? To see how twisted and one-sided the argument has become, let’s go back to the fall of 2001. It just so happens that two miles down the State Highway U.S. 9 from my family’s farm in Williamsburg, MA, there was a bridge being rebuilt by a construction crew who lived half way across the state and every day commuted to Williamsburg to rebuild the bridge under state contract.

After September 11, 2001, the construction crew flew a U.S. flag on the bridge and also posted a sign about supporting the war. For those of us who lived in town who disagreed with either the flag or the sign, it didn’t matter: it had suddenly become “their” bridge, and there was no way they were about to take either the sign or the flag down. The town police supported them. Anyone who had the fortitude to speak up was quickly silenced. Remember the hysterical climate of fall 2001? (Not that much has changed.)

It was public property. It was never “their” bridge, and it wasn’t even “their” town. Now imagine some folks coming into “your” town and putting signs up on the state highway bridge that you cross every day, twice a day, to get to work. Signs that said, well, something you don’t like. Everyone can imagine such a sign, you don’t need me to hold your hand, and if you are honest with your self you can imagine how you would feel about some out-of-towners waving—in your opinion—their garbage in your town and in your face.

And of course, when I walked across the bridge and knocked the sign off its pole in broad daylight, the construction foreman lost his mind, one worker picked up a rock to throw, the police were called, and I was the "bad" citizen.

In Williamsburg it's not my bridge to decorate, even if it is my town, and in Palmer it's not my bridge to decorate, because it's not my town. (Iraq is not my country, but it's my country's oil.) Not unless I want to be a "good" flag-waving citizen.

### **AMHERST COLLEGE OF WAR**

Doug Wight's December flag-burning actions seemed to be part of his rising agitation. Some people are quick to write this off as some kind of personal grandstanding, but the same people would never say that about the first patriots who took up arms at Lexington and Concord in the American Revolution.

It was just a few days before the first flag burning of December 7 that Doug Wight attended a talk by John Bolton, former United Nations Ambassador, held at nearby Amherst College on December 3. Bolton's lecture, "Dealing with Rogue States after Iraq," is part of the U.S. government's dishonest campaign to sell the imminent invasion of Iran, Sudan, Yemen and whoever we decide we don't like. (Oh yeah, Venezuela.) Wight asked John Bolton to admit that he did not have a military service record and the students didn't like it. Wight rose to his feet and challenged Bolton and the Amherst College audience by repeatedly proclaiming "Blood on Your Hands." He was accused of "embarrassing" people and told to "relax" and shut-up. [5]

(See the video <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_dFExiJ\\_4tU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dFExiJ_4tU)>.)

Amherst College perpetuates elitism and ignorance by maintaining a sheltered educational climate. There's no question about freedom of speech when everyone thinks exactly the same and no one says anything out of the accepted norms. In this kind of climate, even the mildest questions sound like heresy, and the outcome is intolerance of other people's beliefs, ideas, actions and freedoms. Rogue states? How do we deal with rogue Ambassadors like John Bolton?

### **HOMELESS MAN ARRESTED**

At the scene of all the December flag incidents Doug Wight left notes attributing the actions to "The American Patriot Liberation Front." In some cases he left a letter.

"They [letters] outline the group's three goals," reported the Greenfield Recorder, "which are: to burn every flag in America, to wake the American people up and to elect an independent president and Congress in 2012 that truly represents the real cares and deep concerns of the American people."

The notes Doug Wight left on the scene spark my humor, reminding me of the movie "V" for "VENDETTA." Much like the theatrical mask worn by the film's character "V" suddenly began to appear on people all around the city, I envision a sudden rash of clandestine flag burnings all across America.

Most of the few people who have heard about Doug Wight setting the flags on fire gained their limited awareness from the few regional newspapers that briefly reported the arrest on December 26 and his arraignment on December 28, and most of the news articles, at least partly, focused public attention on the fact that Doug Wight is homeless.

On December 23, Wight was stopped for a traffic infraction and his truck was matched to reports of one spotted on the scene of the first flag burning incident in Palmer, MA, on December 7. Wight was arrested and jailed when he could not produce his drivers' license, which he later did. The police impounded Wight's truck and ransacked everything inside it. On December 26, the police arrested Wight at 4:30 in the afternoon at an apartment complex in Northampton.

On December 27, Doug Wight was arraigned in Northampton District Court. Wight was in handcuffs and leg irons, an appropriate treatment, some said, for disrespecting the American flag, an example of the oversexed security industry, said others, given Doug Wight's decades of service to the public. Homeless and indigent, Wight was given a public defender and charged with trespassing and destruction of personal property.

The initial charges all stemmed from the incident on December 21 where a 5-by-9 foot American flag that hung from a birch tree outside of a home in Northampton was reduced to ashes. Charges for the other dates would come later.

"This flag burned up in less than five seconds and then it was out," says Wight. "The tree is 20 feet from the house and it is the middle of winter with several feet of snow on the ground. There was absolutely no chance of further fire damage and the charred limb is so minor it is clearly an act of desperation to create a legal issue out of it."

The note found at the scene was signed by the "American Patriot Liberation Front" and it claimed the United States was oppressing millions of people around the world. Police found a similar sign in Doug Wight's truck.

The home belonged to a family whose daughter is a marine in Iraq and whose son had enlisted but not yet served. Doug Wight says he has compassion for the family but cites bigger issues at stake. "It's very sad that his daughter will have to die or be seriously wounded before he 'gets it' and wakes up," said Wight.

News reports also cast aspersions on Doug Wight's character by drawing attention to his homeless status. Headlines like "Homeless Man Charged with Flag Burning" planted seeds in readers' minds that because Doug Wight is homeless his actions are illegitimate. However, no one learns anything by whipping up an irrational mathematical equation that says HOMELESS PERSON EQUALS QUESTIONABLE MORAL CHARACTER.

My dad is homeless, and he is a very respectable, generous, kind-hearted and loving U.S. citizen who pays his taxes and has never, in his entire 73 year-old life, received even a traffic infraction of any kind. You cannot say that about Senator Edward Kennedy or William Jefferson Clinton or Dick Cheney. My dad's homelessness says nothing about his politics or his moral character. Furthermore,



it is nobody's business that he's homeless. He does not use food stamps, stay in a shelter or otherwise tax public services. He is, by the way, a Veteran who served in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War.

Doug Wight didn't choose the "homeless" label that the media assigned to his headlines, and he isn't asking for anyone's sympathy. Indeed, quite the opposite. Since his pre-trial hearing Doug Wight has been very vocal about his actions and his reasoning.

"Over 100,000 innocent Iraqi men, women, and children were murdered in the initial 'shock and awe' bombing massacre of Baghdad," he wrote in one of his letters, "and since then anywhere from 550,000 to 1.1 million Iraqi people have been murdered. In addition, 2 million people are internally displaced refugees and another 2.3 million people are external refugees. And that is only Iraq. All Americans have blood on our hands. Our American flag has become an international symbol of shame around the globe. Better to burn them all! I say."

Doug Wight's homeless status has nothing to do with whether his flag actions were good choices or poor ones. Drawing attention to Doug Wight's homeless status is yet another way that people in the United States dehumanize people based along class or racial lines, merely because such people do not own a home, a car, or keep a regular job. The tendency to attach worthlessness to homeless people is symptomatic of the pathologies of American society. It is an indication of mental illness—on the part of those of us who harbor prejudices against other people.

### **OH SAY CAN'T YOU SEE**

In the past few years people across the United States have become increasingly excited about the American flag. Displays have appeared on people's lawns, in public spaces, dangling from antennas on cars and hanging from trucks. As far as "respect" goes, many people ignore the contradictions in their use and abuse of the U.S. flag.

First there are all those tattered and shredded flags attached to vehicles, many of which blow off and disintegrate in the gutters of the country's highways. So the "respect the flag" argument is just another form of hypocrisy. What is most offensive however is that a huge percentage of the American flags seen in public today are produced in China.

Can people not see the contradictions and stupidities involved? For just \$9.96 you can buy a U.S. flag made in China at Wal-Mart. Since 2001, millions of flags have been imported and tens of millions of dollars in profits have been made on flag sales. In 2001 alone flag imports topped out at \$51.7 million of which \$29.7 million came from China.

"As Bertolt Brecht reminds us," Doug Wight reminds us, "War is business by other means!"

American companies produce more than 100 million flags annually. For those who are concerned about the environment, buying a flag is purchasing waste and pollution. For those who are not concerned about the environment, what difference does it make where it comes from? The symptomatic American carelessness wins again: "I don't care about anyone else or the planet, I want my flag."

“Post 9/11, and in our current state of war with Afghanistan and the Iraqi insurgents, we are all feeling patriotic,” wrote freelance writer Matthew Thompson, who makes the standard assumptions to speak on behalf of some 300 million Americans.

“The sight of bloodied soldiers and flag draped coffins sears unsettling images into our souls on a nightly basis. Remember that ache you feel for our troops and country the next time you need to buy a flag or magnet. For once, check the label, and buy American. A soldier is bleeding right now for your right to be able to buy anything in a free country!” [6]

Indeed, parents whose mangled children return from the killing zones don’t want to find a little “Made in China” tag on the Stars and Stripes draped across their sons’ or daughters’ coffins.

Representing the business of globalization, and hoping to fool Americans about how a globalized economy and workforce benefit us all, we have the deceptive claims that there is nothing more American than an American flag made in China. Problem is, U.S. citizens are so confused they actually swallow the stupidities and lies.

“There is no way you would be able to buy an American flag for \$1 if it were made in the United States,” writes Lois Kaneshiki, a homemaker who all by herself has figured out the basics of slavery abroad and unemployment at home—but can’t make the obvious connection in her muddled or self-interested thinking.

“If America wishes to remain the great nation she is, she should celebrate American flags made in China and, for that matter, anything else foreigners make available to Americans at dirt-cheap prices,” she wrote. “High worker wages, labor laws, unions, and burdensome regulations on business all add costs to doing business that are not a factor in Chinese-made products... The savings Americans realize from these purchases, estimated at more than \$1,000 per year just from shopping at Wal-Mart, allow families to afford more luxuries than they otherwise could if every single product they bought had to be made in the United States.” [7]

It doesn’t matter if American workers don’t have health care, secure employment, a living wage or a clean and safe environment—a.k.a. those burdensome regulations on business—and it doesn’t matter if companies abroad have no protections for workers.

Those “burdensome regulations” are meant to protect people from the kind of irresponsible greed and carelessness that corporations and capitalism thrive on. Making my point are the millions of cheap but contaminated Chinese toys that have been snapped up by American parents and given to their children play with. What kind of savings do American families accrue when they take their children to the doctors to find out they have brain damage from lead poisoning? Naturally, the writer does not address the sweatshop labor in China—not in my backyard—or the lead poisoning of American children.

Does the American flag represent freedom from "burdensome regulations" that result in suffering for the American people? Sure enough. The elimination of “burdensome regulations” are at the very heart of the National Flag Foundation’s programs to indoctrinate children in favor of “free

enterprise”—meaning to teach children how to exploit other people for their self-ish-interests and private profit.

## **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Here is an example of how foolish and childish Americans can be. On one list-serve where the news story about Doug Wight’s arrest was posted the readers who commented complained that Wight was a fraud because he was “staying with friends” in their Northampton apartment. So not only are homeless people worthless, but they have no right to have friends, or friends to stay with, or even to stay at someone’s apartment?

Another reader complained that Wight is a freeloader and a liar because he claims to be homeless yet he owns a stylish pick-up truck. Not only are homeless people considered scum, they are not supposed to own anything at all, else they are also liars and cheats.

“Anybody got a meaningful job for this guy?” wrote another reader. Obviously, there is no meaning in protesting against war, especially by homeless people. In fact, many of us believe there is no deeper meaning in life than to take a principled stand like Doug Wight has. As far as Doug Wight is concerned, indeed, he has nothing better to do than stand up for truth, liberty and freedom for all.

The examples above indicate the huge prejudice and hypocrisies of the American public. You see this hypocrisy and prejudice in action with homeless veterans on the streets of our cities. And there is the real scandal. The same violence is directed at thousands of Americans and it is even used against U.S. War Veterans.

Thousands and thousands of Native American and Hawai’ian people today are homeless and there is a direct relationship between the expanding U.S. military occupation and toxic pollution of Hawai’i and the homelessness and ill-treatment of Hawai’ian people. Been on a Hawai’ian vacation lately? Oahu is repeatedly circled, all day long, by black helicopters: the entire island has become a huge military base where uranium weaponry used on shooting ranges has contaminated the environment. Homeless Hawai’ian people are seen everywhere; and everywhere they are mistreated. Tourism masks the militarism in Hawai’i.

According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) says that the vast majority of the nation’s homeless veterans are single, most come from poor, disadvantaged communities, 45% suffer from mental illness, and half have substance abuse problems. America’s homeless veterans have served in World War II, Korean War, Cold War, Vietnam War, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), Operation Iraqi Freedom, or the military’s anti-drug cultivation efforts in South America. Forty-seven percent of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam Era. More than 67% served our country for at least three years and 33% were stationed in a war zone. [8]

It is very telling that no one keeps national records on homeless veterans. Not only does the American war machine create homeless people, it punishes the victims. The Pentagon does not have any problem counting enlistees. This shows yet again how the U.S. government operates — irresponsibly, with no responsibility for the Veterans who have served this country at their own

peril. Irresponsibility is the big problem of the United States and the big problem of the citizenry: a refusal to take responsibility and a refusal to be held accountable for our actions and for the actions of our government and corporations.

“Polls show that seventy percent of all Americans are opposed to the Iraq war and want it ended,” says Doug Wight, “yet what percent are willing to take a strong civil disobedience action to help make that happen? Every day I have to deal with the rage and sadness of these two terrible wars and the shame and responsibility that comes with it because it is my beloved country that is inflicting these murderous wars on innocent people.”

The National Coalition on Homeless Veterans offers VA estimates that nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and some 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year. One of the main reasons for Veteran homelessness is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): a debilitating and sometimes deadly effect of the lasting trauma that war inflicts on soldiers and civilians everywhere.

This story of the U.S. government’s treatment of Veterans is a unconscionable scandal. In weighing one’s quick moral judgment of Doug Wight’s actions one should take such facts into account and ask: where is the moral high ground? Who are the big hypocrites here?

The newspapers reported that Doug Wight moved to Massachusetts to be part of the intentional community, Sirrius, in Shutesbury, MA, “founded in 1979 with the goal of creating a self-sustaining, ecologically-friendly community.”

And so one newspaper reader complained that Doug Wight is also an environmental hypocrite. “This guy supposedly left the flag burning in a tree, catching it on fire,” she wrote, “but he moved to dedicate his life to the environment? Something is off here.”

Indeed, what is off is common sense or rational thinking or perspective. The Pentagon—never mind all the multinational corporations—produces millions of tons of toxic waste every year, but Doug Wight is criticized for charring the twigs on the limb of a tree.

“Many of us here claim to be environmentally and ecologically friendly,” another reader chimed in, “yet we still use non-biodegradable items such as plastic garbage bags, we still drive gas-guzzling SUVs, we still refuse to recycle glass containers. Mr. Wight is not the only hypocrite in the world, nor is he even a particularly important hypocrite. He just happened to get himself mentioned in the news. But I think Mr. Wight has a valid reason for doing what he did, even if his methods might be a tad illegal. He is trying to draw some much needed attention to the REAL needs of millions of people in the U.S.A.”

“Americans need to understand how truly insidious large-scale corporate finance and multinational capitalism is,” wrote Doug Wight in a long treatise on war that he hopes to have published. “People need to wake-up to see how it is destroying our environment and oppressing billions of poor people everywhere. Too many Americans are a bunch of ‘sleeping sheep’ who need to wake-up now to help bring about fundamental changes that will help create healthy, equitable, peaceful, democratic, and sustainable communities, societies, and nations. We have to wake-up NOW!”

“Freedom of speech does not extend to endangering other people or their property,” said another reader reacting to Doug Wight’s actions. It seems most people would agree, and so now we get to the final issues.

## **POLICE STATE POLICE**

“I actually planned on getting arrested eventually and attempted to turn myself in four times,” said Doug Wight, mentioning another aspect of the story the press ignored. “Every time I called the police they assured me no warrant had been issued for my arrest. I even had my attorney call the police. At 4:30 pm on December 26th, I called the police again and spoke to a Lieutenant who said he didn’t know if there had been a warrant issued. I asked him to go check. After a few minutes he returned to inform me that no warrant had been issued for my arrest. Sixty seconds later the Northampton storm-troopers were beating down the door of my friend’s apartment to arrest me. Fortunately, anticipating my arrest, I had already gone to the local press and given them a 90 minute story of why I was burning flags.”

By arresting Wight on their own terms the police insured that he would go to jail with bail required. Further, the court looks far more favorably on those who turn themselves in than it does those arrested by warrant and posse.

The state prosecutor recommended that Wight’s bail be set at \$50,000 because he apparently chose to see Doug Wight as a madman—the way that state prosecutors typically exaggerate the risks of those who appear before the court. The judge set bail at \$2500 cash, but the public defender defended and Doug Wight emptied his savings account and posted \$500 bail. Considering him a flight risk—rather than a civil disobedience case who willingly sought to face the consequences of his actions—the court confiscated his drivers’ license.

Homeless and without transport—his truck’s camper and mattress also served as his makeshift home at times—Wight then faced the sub-zero January temperatures of a snowy New England winter with no funds. Much to his surprise, even some of his friends did not support his cause. He spent three nights with no place to sleep.

“I feel that my entire life has been defined by wars,” Doug Wight told me. “I was born in 1942 and lost my name-sake uncle in that war. Then the Korea War came in the 1950’s and then the Vietnam War in which I lost three very close friends—two of these from neighborhood streets where I grew up in Westfield, New Jersey. Then there was the first Persian Gulf War in the 1990s and now our two wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.”

## **DESTROYING PRIVATE PROPERTY**

“The fact that Doug Wight was both jobless and homeless at the time makes a significant difference to many people who would be weighing the merits of his protest,” says local carpenter and civic activist Stephen Goodale, an acquaintance of Doug Wight. Goodale, who is part of a growing

movement of citizens who challenge the U.S. government's explanation of the September 11 attacks, disagrees with Doug Wight's protest.

"Doug chose to burn a flag that was private property, instead of burning one that belonged to him, or to the federal government," says Goodale, listing his strongest objection. "This was a catastrophic mistake, in my opinion."

The point about private property is well taken, and one that seems to have turned many people off to Doug Wight's cause. I am one who believes that burning the flags at or taking them from people's homes is questionable. I believe it contributes to fear and violence and I have a lot of sympathy for the family who woke up to find their flag burned or stolen by some sneaky bandit under the cover of darkness.

I love the country where I grew up—I was born a redneck farmer in rural Massachusetts—and I love traveling across this land, and meeting people, and seeing how they live. I love my friends and my family and my neighbors and even some of the stupid things that only Americans would do. I also love the people and land of Afghanistan, Congo and Nicaragua, where I have worked. But in the months after September 11, 2001, I posted a sign on my family's property in Williamsburg, a few miles west of Northampton, and when my sign was vandalized I was angry. It was my sign, it was my families' property, and I felt completely violated.

We are very touchy, aren't we, about private property?

The farm was attacked over 40 times in the next months: attackers defaced and stole the sign, stole the farm stand canopy, destroyed the farm stand and finally some 4 x 4 pick-up trucks came at the night and tore down the large teepee I was living in while running an organic garden. Each time the sign was vandalized I put it back up. As far as I know, the police did nothing to find out who did it. But I consider those who attacked my farm cowards, because they did not show their faces.

How many readers disagree with Doug Wight sneaking around in the middle of the night destroying people's private property? Is this terrorism? Was it terrorism to attack my farm stand and tear down my teepee?

"The vast majority of the activists in the Pioneer Valley have been supportive," says Doug Wight, "saying that more strong actions have to be waged since Congress refuses to end these immoral wars. It never ceases to amaze me that Americans will get upset and angry about the burning of our national icon. The very same people accept the hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings our military 'burns'. We all should be furiously enraged by the atrocities we have wrought, which are annihilating the heart and soul of America and sapping her once great spirit. Instead, we slink softly and lamely into the silence of the night."

Terrorism often moves under cover of night. U.S. Special Forces do all their work after dark. In Afghanistan, where I have investigated it, U.S. troops break into people's homes and commit crimes against innocent people who have never held a weapon in their life, and whose family members have never done so either. U.S. covert operations like this are occurring all over the world.

The United States foreign policy is a foreign policy of destruction, both at home and abroad. There is no understanding, and to cooperation, only bullying, torture and other forms of terrorism—and everywhere the destruction of private property.

Doug Wight said it well: Blood on our hands. There is nothing honorable about what U.S. troops are doing around the world. Soldiers—men and women young and old—are victims of a violent system that indoctrinates and exploits them, but they are, first and foremost, perpetrators of violence.

Before judging Doug Wight for destroying a few flags, even under the cover of darkness, Americans—all of us—need to take responsibility to stop the massive destruction of personal property and the destruction of entire nations and societies by the U.S. war machine and its European, Canadian and Israeli allies. And this includes the officials, and especially the judge, at the Northampton District Court.

Anyone who participates in war becomes a legitimate target, a culpable agent, an enemy to someone somewhere. War is murder, and no one should expect anything less to come of U.S. troops who participate in it. Hiding behind the flag and taking some “I am not part of this violence” stance is self-imposed and willful ignorance of one’s culpability.

Families whose sons and daughters are involved in war have responsibility in this too: None of this “I don’t understand” nonsense from the Boston Globe example above. (The Boston Globe understands, and very well, how to select its quotes.) We are all responsible for our obliviousness, and obliviousness is no excuse for murder.

“The first step to waking-up is to “feel” something—like sadness, horror, anger or disgust,” Wight says. “Something! In truth, WE THE PEOPLE have the power to stop these two sick wars, bring our troops home, and drastically reduce our military-industrial-congressional complex, but not until we care enough to ‘feel the pain’ of what our mendacious America is doing to Iraq and Afghanistan.”

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[1] “Anarchist Group Behind Local Flag Burning,” Associated Press, December 24, 2007.

[2] “Massachusetts orders removal of overpass flags, troop tributes,” Boston Globe, Dec. 4, 2007.

[3] “Patrick Halts Plan to Remove War Memorials,”

<[http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/12/05/a\\_retrieve\\_for\\_road\\_banners/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/12/05/a_retrieve_for_road_banners/)>.

[4] Nazi Photos <<http://www.nobeliefs.com/nazis.htm>> & Posters

<<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters2.htm>>.

[5] See YouTube video Amherst College: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFExiJ\\_4tU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFExiJ_4tU)>.

[6] Matthew Thompson, “American Flag Made Overseas: China Profits From Our Patriotic Hearts, Soldiers' Blood,” Associated Content, May 18, 2005.

[7] Lois Kaneshiki, “What’s More American Than an American Flag Made in China?” Freedom Daily, January 2, 2008.

[8] National Coalition for Homeless Veterans: <<http://www.nchv.org/background.cfm>>.