

THE BEST WAY TO TEACH RESPECT

On February 23, 1945, photographer Joe Rosenthal snapped a picture that would become the world's most reproduced image. The object of his Pulitzer Prize winning effort? The American flag being raised over Iwo Jima. Why was it so important that the flag be visible on Mt. Suribachi?

The flag was more than a patch of colored fabric. It embodied a cause, a purpose, and a mission that inspired the best from the American soldiers. Those stars and stripes were another way of expressing duty, honor, and country. The flag meant something to those in the conflict, something they were willing to give their lives for.

My wife Mary was recently in a group of people who were asked what the flag meant to them. In an instant, this event from 44 years ago popped into her mind:

"Uncle James, Aunt Fran, Mama Daniel (my grandmother) and I had gone for a ride on a clear summer day. We stopped at a small post office, and Uncle James went inside. We had parked near a flagpole.

"Mama Daniel and Aunt Fran were in the front seat talking. I was leaning over the back of the seat listening to them and staring up at the flag gently fluttering against an incredibly blue sky. The conversation lulled for a few moments, and then Mama Daniel spoke. It was obvious that she too had been staring at the banner in the sky. 'I think that red, white and blue together are the most beautiful colors of all.' 'I was just thinking the same thing,' said Aunt Fran. Then followed a quiet, rambling discussion of the flag, its colors and its meaning. There was a gentle respect in every word, and they never considered that a freckled, bespeckled eight-year-old was soaking in every attitude and nuance.

"I was barely aware that Uncle James had just come home from the Korean War or that World War II had just ended a few years before. But for the mother of the soldier and the wife of the soldier, these wars were fresh. They spoke with the knowledge that Uncle James might not have come home. They spoke with respect for the flag and the country that he might have died for.

"My memory of this event is as fresh as it was the day it happened. I have thought of that conversation and have seen that beautiful flag against that blue sky hundreds of times in my mind.

"Aunt Fran and I recently discussed why there's so little respect for the flag today. Perhaps one reason is that it's so hard to sit in the quiet and soak in respect from those who have it. Instead, radios, TVs, tapes, and CDs provide 'entertainment' just to fill up the time. But in a few quiet moments 44 years ago, a good citizen was born. Entertainment has never created such a thing."

And so we must be careful to whom we listen. We'll eventually be like them.