

Letter to Diane Feinstein

by Ferdinanda

Dear Senator:

I am writing with regard to proposed legislation to change the national anthem from "The Star-Spangled Banner" to "God Bless America," H.R. 3051. To my knowledge, no action has been taken on this legislation, and I hope it will forever remain so; however, I feel the risk to civil liberty in this nation is too great to leave this matter unexamined.

Senator, given the present climate across the globe, this legislation may seem terribly unimportant, but I assure you that it is essential in these difficult times to remain vigilant and steadfast in the protection of the individual rights and freedoms of the public which are assured by the Constitution.

The 2000 National Census indicates that seven percent of this nation's citizens are either agnostic or atheist. This statistic suggests that several million Americans — including myself — will be placed in a terrible predicament, should the national anthem be changed. How can I proclaim my dedication to this country — my patriotism, that runs as strong in my veins as in any god-fearing citizen — how can I demonstrate my pride in America, without professing a faith that I do not in fact possess? And if, out of personal conviction — indeed, in exercising my freedom of religion — I should refrain from singing "God Bless America" in a public forum, what message do I send to my neighbors, with my silence? What must those standing, and singing, by my side infer? That I am not a patriot, that I do not support my country? How does their singing, their invoking the name of "God," coerce and intimidate the non-believer to do the same?

Our present national anthem is beautiful and appropriate; as literature, it captures a moment of drama, uncertainty, and hope. What poetry, to have our anthem end, not in a statement, but in a poignant question: "oh say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave over the land of the free, and the home of the brave?" If our national anthem is changed to "God Bless America," then the answer to that question, for me and many other patriotic Americans, will be "no."

Some may argue that "at a time like this" such protests as mine are not constructive, they are divisive, they are... un-American. I counter that "a time like this" is indeed the ultimate time for the protection of Constitutionally-granted rights. How can we represent democracy abroad when basic freedoms at home are dismissed as "unfashionably unpatriotic"? I am reminded of the film *Dr. Zhivago*, in which a shackled man, on his way to forced labor and certain death, proclaims "I am the only free man on this train; the rest of you are cattle." Surely it is freedom of thought and freedom of expression that America must defend, lest we ourselves become a nation of cattle. By keeping the national anthem a secular hymn to America's freedom, we will ensure that this truly remains the land of the free and the home of the brave. I deeply appreciate your consideration of this matter.