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Pride and Protest: A Veteran and An Activist Discuss the American Flag

By: Jeremy Dobbins

When President-elect Donald Trump visited Vandalia earlier this year, a young man named Tommy DiMassimo rushed the stage. He was arrested and sentenced to one year's probation. This month, a Federal judge ended that probation early without objection from the Department of Justice. Tommy DiMassimo is an activist, and before the Trump incident, he participated in a march at Wright State University protesting racism and police brutality where he stood on an American flag. Many veterans were outraged. Marine Corp veteran and Wright State student Jeremy Dobbins of Springfield was there, and upset by the demonstration. Our Veterans' Voices series continues with a conversation between Jeremy and Tommy, who despite their differences, agreed to talk about that contentious day.

Transcript:

Jeremy Dobbins (JD): My interest came from the protest you had on campus. What was the catalyst that kind of set you into motion?

Tommy DiMassimo (TD): We did a lot of protesting on campus, a lot of respectable, peaceful, come if you want, we're not going to get in your face, protesting and we were ignored. So I went out there with American flag. I didn't burn it, I didn't spit on it, I didn't do anything like that, but I did lay it down, I stood on top of it to make my case.

JD: What made you decide to get your voice heard that way?

TD: The American flag is used by a lot of people. It's also worn by politicians as lapels, and it means nothing to them because those people do all the corrupt things that we hear about on a daily basis. They do not represent the people of this country, they don't care about the people this country, and yet they're using that symbol, too. So I'm trying to get everyone that represents the power structure behind that flag, not necessarily just the people who went and fought to protect it.

JD: I know when I saw it, it was like something much more personal to me. In the military, at the beginning and end of each day, they raise and lower the collars and the flag is an integral part of just the daily routine. And people in the military really don't like flag burning. You didn't burn the flag - you stopped short there. To me, maybe because I'm just a weird person and I think logically and rationally most of time, or try to, it just seemed like it was pitting people against

each other who really aren't against each other in the first place. And it creates tension between groups who should really be collaborating.

TD: Dude, I wish that was how worked. I wish we all sat down and had totally objective, rational conversations and just solved these issues. That's not America, it just isn't. And at least when we come out of that, we have the knowledge that this is how vets feel about flags; this is how blacks feel about police brutality. We can't say that we don't know anymore.

JD: Did you receive any feedback from black veterans, or from the group that you're kind of trying to be the voice for?

TD: I would never say that I'm, in any way shape or form, trying to be the voice of black people.

JD: But you were bringing attention to the cause.

TM: Yeah. When I was in the seventh grade, I went to a predominantly black middle school in an economically disadvantaged area. And we had a white teacher who was blatantly racist, just said very racist things to the class. I was one of two white kids in there, so when she would say things like, "You people don't know how to act," or you people this..., it was very clear to me that she was saying something racist. So I had the idea to petition to get her fired. She caught me and some of my fellow classmates with the petition in class, and she started threatening us. We marched out of class and we marched down to the administrator's office, and two weeks later she was fired. So that was my introduction to the idea of people power, and that there's power in collective action, there's power in nonviolent civil disobedience.

JD: I can understand what you said that symbolism has a lot of power, but you know, it isn't the flag of some oppressor, it's the flag of the liberator. It has a very mixed and troubled history, but it's our history, as a people.

TD: I was using the power the American flag had because I have a right to it, as well. I may not have gone to fight to defend my country, but I'm still a citizen in this country, and so that flag is still mine. And I did everything I could to be respectful without letting being respectable keep me from doing something effective.

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