

CRISTIN TIERNEY



The divisive Dread Scott artwork George Bush called “disgraceful”

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In the late 1980s, a young student created a piece of art so impactful multiple presidents have discussed it, some directly, some not. In 2016, when Donald Trump declared that people who burned the American flag deserved to lose their citizenship and spend a year in jail, many thought of Dread Scott's piece.

When George H.W. Bush criticised it at the time, others followed suit and condemned Scott's work. Just as it was engineered to, it still inspires fierce debate, and *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag* highlights the arbitrary material things – guns, flags, Confederate monuments – that some Americans allow to rule them emotionally.

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While he was a budding art student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and still going by Scott Tyler, Scott unveiled his contentious piece. The stars and stripes of the flag lay strewn across the floor, and looming above it was a collage of flag-covered military coffins and flag burnings. But the artwork wasn't purely visual. Audiences were encouraged to engage with it and were free to stand on it. They could also write down their reactions in a ledger.

The ledger far more effectively illustrated the reaction it could stir than the media controversy did. While the press coverage was divided into two camps that dictated whether it was moral or not, the viewers were forced to actually reckon with their own thoughts. Some were surprisingly subdued. One person in loopy cursive wrote: "The proper way to display a flag is to have it hanging up." It's also the most profound. While others wrote vitriolic, racist rants, this person earnestly answered the initial question.

If things were less politically charged, that would be all his artwork set out to solve. But the reality was muddied by war, allegiance to American tradition, and racism. One viewer, across an entire third of a page, wrote: "DREAD – Go back to the foreign country where you belong." Another wrote: "Use it as a dishrag!". President Bush then added to the furore, saying the sight of an American flag on the floor was "disgraceful".

The president at least had the sense to add that he was wary of legislating that disgrace by saying he was "worried about free speech". But the conservative side that usually vouched for freedom of speech suddenly found themselves calling for action against Scott. Kansas Senator Bob Dole said: "I don't know much about art, but I know desecration when I see it," and proposed legislation that would ban the flag being displayed on the ground. The SAIC temporarily closed amid the controversy.

"I am a German girl," declared one visitor in the ledger book before Scott's show got shut down. "If we Germans would admire our flag as you all do, we would be called Nazis again.... I think you do have too much trouble about this flag." The timing of Scott's heavily protested piece coincided with an unrelated legal decision that saw the US Congress make flag desecration illegal in 1989. Troubles about the flag continue to erupt over America.