One might argue that our nation’s flag is but a mere symbol. True as that may be, symbols play an important role in the life of a nation.

Growing up, I was taught that whenever we heard the anthem playing and saw Old Glory waving, we would immediately show our respect.

I would stand.

I stand because the Stars and Stripes represent the strikingly simple principles of freedom outlined in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Our nation, still the freest nation on earth, is founded on the sacred belief that all people are created equal and granted by God certain unalienable rights.

Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness.

Our magnificent Declaration foreshadowed the genius that would later permeate the Constitution. Consider Jefferson’s prophetic words recognizing “that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” We are the product of an experiment in self-governing freedom.

And so I stand.

I fully understand our nation’s history has been far from perfect.

Race in America has been the persistent stumbling-block of our experiment in freedom. Birthing a new nation “conceived in liberty” while still enslaving, dehumanizing and denigrating an entire race of fellow humans was a corrupting contradiction for which our Founders provided no adequate explanation nor remedy.

Black Americans have endured a legacy of slavery, segregation and racial discrimination that still today leaves a stubborn stain of inequity, injury and injustice. Yet, the very republic that permitted these evils also, through it all, sustained a founding vision of equality that has provided a beacon of hope for that more perfect union.
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “All we say to America is, be true to what you said on paper.”

He saw, as we see, that so many times we have failed to achieve our noblest aspirations. Although we may fall short, we can look to our history and see the great promise of freedom, as symbolized by our flag. And so we continue to strive to be true to what was “on paper.”

I stand because America stands for the right of all her people to live free in pursuit of our happiness.

I stand because despite our many differences and debates we are ultimately that one nation under God.

As I stand for my country, I do so with pride that I live in a nation of such great hope and promise. And I am energized by those who stand with me -- united in our expression of love for freedom and respect for our nation.

I stand to honor all those who have sacrificed – who have fought and died -- defending our flag and our way of life.

But I also stand to protect the freedom of those who choose not to stand -- perhaps even of those who might choose, instead, to kneel.

Expressing respect for our nation, like praying, is something we all should do as we are blessed by the benefits of freedom every day. And yet mandating such expressions as somehow compulsory would violate the very freedoms we stand to protect. In our free society, we all have a choice.

I choose to stand.

*Curts Hill is Indiana’s 43rd Attorney General.*