



# Taking Care of Miss Liberty

by  
George  
Rush

It's a family effort, keeping the weirdos  
from blowing up your back yard

**F**ORTY-EIGHT YEARS BEFORE the Moffitts arrived on Liberty Island, a young man named Ralph Gleason squeezed through a window in the Statue of Liberty's crown, glanced off the statue's breast, and landed a few feet from a workman mowing the lawn. Gleason's pockets held six dollars, several holy medals, and a religious text; up in the crown, near Gleason's hat, a note read: "Dear Aunt Molly, forgive me, please, and pray for me." Twelve years before the Moffitts arrived, police arrested Canadian Gilles Legault and a group of black extremists for plotting to dynamite the Statue of Liberty's arm. One of the extremists allegedly had wanted to "really put a hurt on that old bitch." Legault, using a leather thong from his artificial leg, hanged himself in prison. As though possessed by this history, the weather was horrible one January day in 1977 when Dave Moffitt, the new superintendent of the Statue of Liberty, brought his family from Concord, Massachusetts, to Liberty Island. Chilling squalls struck the barge bringing the family's moving van. The bargemen, shivering, crossed the harbor's dark waters, unloaded their cargo, and left.

The Moffitts had never heard of Gleason or Legault. They trampled the lawn's fresh snow, bounding in and out of their government-issue red-brick house, relocating the paintings, the pretty spice jars, the cat with the nervous disorder, the religious texts. They introduced themselves to their neighbors, the other rangers whom the National Park Service had also assigned to this outpost opposite Manhattan's skyscrapers. Attentive Lutherans, the Moffitts promptly joined Manhattan's Gustavus Adolphus church. Carolyn, a trim, attractive woman with dark, flipped hair, joined the choir. Their sons, Michael, seven, and John, eleven, enrolled in Public School 26 on nearby Governors Island; the boys scoured their own island for driftwood and built a backyard clubhouse. Their sister, Andrea, thirteen, set to sketching the island's gulls. Dave, thirty-eight, a handsome, rangy Texan, motorboated with Carolyn to the PTA meetings. He treated the family to a Broadway show. He tested the water—casting into the dirty Upper Bay for striped bass and catching dozens. And strolling along the seawall after dinner, checking whether anybody had put seed in the bird feeder, Dave appraised the new life as pretty good. At night, through his bedroom window, he glimpsed the backside of his responsibility—the spotlighted, soft-green gown of Miss Liberty.

GEORGE RUSH is a writer who has made his home on New York's Upper West Side for the past three years.

But things began to happen. A month after the Moffitts' arrival, a police boat picked up the children after school. The island's regular ferry service had been cut. Demonstrators, primarily Iranians, had taken over the statue. Six of them sat chained inside the head of Liberty, who stood sandal-footed on the broken chains of tyranny. The six had smashed seven glass panes in Liberty's crown and dropped, past her cheeks, five-yard-long banners reading FREE THE 18 and DOWN WITH THE SHAH. Dave Moffitt, wearing his Smokey the Bear hat, climbed the statue's helix-shaped stairway, 168 iron steps, to talk with the six. They demanded a televised press conference in the crown. Dave explained that a crown-conference, with camera crews negotiating the helix, was impossible.

"They told me: 'Get the hell out,'" Dave reported later, having retreated from the crown.

A little after seven that night, park rangers cut the demonstrators' chains and the six departed peacefully. At home the Moffitts discussed the day. Dave felt for the thousands of sightseers shut out during the five hours. Carolyn was nettled by the swarm of reporters. As for the boys, they posted a sign on their clubhouse. It warned: KEEP OUT.

Thus the Moffitts discovered that their metallic object was magnetic—that its force field extended across the country,



**RANGER DAVE MOFFITT**  
considers his backyard chores.

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pulling every imaginable kind of breast-beater to the 10.8 acres the family called home. "I knew there would be challenges," Dave acknowledged, "but..."

But who could have anticipated the man who thought Jimmy Carter's agents were poisoning him and who wrapped himself in an American flag and lay down in the crown ready to die? Who could have foreseen the spat between the Puerto Rican group that wanted to take over the crown and the camera crew that—there first!—was shooting an Elliot Gould movie about a boxing kangaroo?

The Moffitts were at church one Sunday receiving Holy Communion when out of the crown shot the words *SHAH MUST BE TRIED AND PUNISHED*. The 140-foot-long banner fluttered from Liberty's crown hours after students in Tehran seized the American embassy there. Phoned at church, Dave heard that Iranians again had chained themselves to the statue. He drove to the tip of Manhattan, where a staff boat waited. Two hours later, seven Muslims sat in Dave's office. They complained about their handcuffs and about the United States allowing the shah into New York for gallbladder surgery. At one point they asked if they could go outside and kneel toward Mecca. Fine, Dave said, but then he stepped outside and saw the tribes of cameramen and changed his mind.

"To hell with them," he said. "I'm not going to give them all this free PR. We're just going to make them look like nice guys. And they're jerks."

He returned to his office and told the demonstrators no.

"Why not?" they asked.

"Because you didn't let me finish my prayers."

This false reason bothered Dave—especially when the deputy chief of park police called from Washington to ask if Dave had heard about the embassy in Tehran. "Be careful," the deputy chief administrator advised. What if a connection existed between these Iranians and those holding hostages?

Dave was distraught: "Should I have given these guys coffee and spending money and a pat on the back, and *not* arrested them?"

That week a federal magistrate charged the demonstrators with petty offenses. Presidential candidate John Connally suggested they be deported. The FBI, eight months later, sought one of them in the Washington murder of an ex-shah diplomat.

"COME DOWN FROM THERE, YOU FAGGOTS," EDWIN DRUMMOND HEARD AS HE CLUNG TO THE STATUE OF Liberty's gown. Drummond and Stephen Rutherford had flown in from California and chosen Mother's Day weekend to climb the outside of the statue. Below them, on the pedestal balcony, were police and rangers. Dave Moffitt was furious about the irreparable damage he believed

the climbers were causing the statue.

"You've no need to say all that," a British voice rejoined. "We're not insulting you."

The mountaineers continued scaling the green-copper skin. Drummond pumped feverishly on one rubber suction cup, then the other, wishing they would stick for more than thirty seconds. The bullhorns, the helicopters, and someone banging inside the statue distracted Drummond, and he slipped twice but caught himself. By midafternoon he reached a point between the statue's shoulder blades and into a fold jammed two climbing nuts from which to hang. Dave, looking out his office window, saw Drummond's forceful arm movements and told the reporter on the phone: "My God, they're hammering pitons."

Sightseers—sharing Dave's impression—hollered up: "Get the hell off my statue," and "I hope you break your necks." Drummond, finally getting better footing, opened a twenty-five-foot-long sash reading *LIBERTY WAS FRAMED. FREE GERONIMO PRATT*. It referred to Elmer Pratt, a former Black Panther convicted in 1972 of killing a schoolteacher while she played tennis in Santa Monica. Along with others in Amnesty International, the climbers believed that the FBI framed Pratt in an undercover operation with illegal tactics. The climbers remained on the statue throughout the cold night. Grilled under thousands of watts of halide floodlight, they recited poems by Emerson, Sandburg, and Auden. They wrapped themselves in a sleeping bag but couldn't sleep.

Nor could Carolyn Moffitt. Most disturbances, only a few hours long, couldn't vault her indifference, but helicopters—all through the night—got to her. She glowered at Mother's Day morning. Around ten A.M.—after shouting their explanations to the media down below—the mountaineers descended. They were piqued when rangers whisked them past still-scribbling reporters. But Dave Moffitt believed there'd been enough press coverage. He worried still about the statue—perhaps about his country, too—when he commented: "It may look strong but the skin is terribly fragile."

In the two following years other illegal actions disassembled island order. TV helicopters—flying low to witness Iranians—blew a piece of bark down Dave's throat and knocked over the boys' parakeet cage. A young man, claiming to be campaigning for mayor, crawled out on top of Liberty's head. He refused to leave unless he heard his statement broadcast over the transistor radio Dave loaned him. Dave wished the tumults would stop.

"The statue is the most appropriate place in America to demonstrate your grievance," he said. "Just get a permit." Called in advance, Dave's staff will courteously provide the disenfranchised with bleachers, bullhorns, a pretty spot by the flagpole. "But naturally," Dave added,

"an illegal act gets more attention. I demonstrated against the Vietnam War. You go for the media attention."

Three years after the Moffitts' arrival, while Dave watched the *NBC Nightly News*, a bomb exploded in the base of the statue. By most accounts it was the first time it had happened. No one was injured; the statue remained sound. But the explosion deeply perplexed Dave. He thought about requesting a transfer.

"I can understand demonstrations of all kinds," he said. "I can understand the twisted logic but not condone the bombing of the Chase Manhattan Bank, the symbol of capitalism. Or the White House, the seat of the evil government; or the Minute Man Statue, the tribute to the first Army. But why would they want to destroy freedom? Every group that ever claimed repression here was fighting *for* freedom."

"Since we were children, the statue has been analogous in our minds with freedom..." Tim McCormick typed on a Park Service typewriter when he and other Vietnam veterans took over the statue in 1971. "Then we went to fight a war in the name of freedom. We saw that freedom is a selective expression allowed only to those who are white and who maintain the status quo."

This distrust of official representations of freedom was perhaps shared by those who called the FBI and *The New York Times* after the explosion. Five and a half hours after the news of the bombing the tally for claims of responsibility stood at three phone calls from the anti-Castro Omega-7; four from the Nationalist Socialist Movement (a Nazi group?); two from the Puerto Rican FALN; one from the Palestine Liberation Army; one (later disavowed) from the Jewish Defense League. The strongest suspects were Croatian "freedom fighters," but everybody else wanted in on the action.

THE MOFFITTS REMAINED ON LIBERTY ISLAND. AND IN 1982, A FEW DAYS FROM THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY of that first demonstration, another take-over occurred. It was, again, Iranians. This time they opposed Khomeini and were exceptionally polite. In the crown, after removing the screws for the windows, they placed them in a plastic bag labeled *SCREWS FOR THE WINDOWS*. They handcuffed themselves inside but gave the rangers keys for the handcuffs. They asked if they could chant and if their banners used correct English.

The press grumbled about the buck-fifty ferry trip. Carolyn Moffitt sniffed: "I'm not impressed." Dave Moffitt, grinning and mugging in his office one bleak day, assayed: "The Iranians are in a rut. The novelty of their chaining themselves up has worn off. They could have set an effigy of the ayatollah on fire. Or carried a coffin up Wall Street. A million things. They have no imagination. They really need a PR man. I'm available." ☉