From

A Flag for New Milford

The Practical Guide for Creating a Successful Civic Flag

The Flag Bulletin, No. 168

How will the judges evaluate the entries?

All entries are judged by the New Milford Flag Evaluation Panel made up of New Milford residents chosen by the town (6 members + 2-3 alternates). Their scorecard:

! 25% for Simplicity       !25% for Distinctness (how does it look from a distance)
! 25% for Use of Color      ! 25% for Use of Symbols

A few ideas about each criterion.

Simplicity -- The most important attribute of a good flag, bar none. As contrasted with clutter, complexity, busyness – simplicity is the sine qua non quality. It is intimately involved in the other key criteria of color, symbolism, and distinctness. Thus, simplicity in the use of colors and symbols reflects in the simplicity of the overall design. Likewise, a un-simple, cluttered design predictably will lack distinctness. Good flag design is simple design.

Can a flag be too simple? With the possible exception of Libya, no. Remember that clutter cloys and simplicity sways. Remember also this practical maxim: "If an average school child can draw it from memory, it is a simple design." For example, Japan and Canada are simple designs, superbly effective; Zimbabwe and Grenada are considerably less so. A quick look at Wisconsin for those stout of heart. Then Michigan. Survivors will be exposed to Milwaukee later in the program.

Color -- The basic colors used in flags are red, orange, yellow, green, light blue, dark blue, black, and white. Other colors are possible in principle but their use is chancy and their cost considerable (think of the extra cost as having to come out of your own pocket). Furthermore:

Use white and yellow to separate the other colors -- if you don't you'll end up with Estonia instead of Botswana (note how white finbriation separates blue from black in Botswana), you'll get poorly designed Guam rather than striking Wyoming, Armenia instead of Spain, Bangladesh in place of Japan, Haiti in stead of Yugoslavia; the stripes of Laos rather than those of Costa Rica. Even such devil-in-the-details as the coat-of-arms in Slovenia versus Slovakia.

A couple of incidentals about colors: Gold is not a flag color, Morocco and Egypt notwithstanding. Shun placing yellow next to white. If you disbelieve that, check Cyprus, Afghanistan, Saba, Tajikistan, Vatican City. If you still disbelieve, please don't do it anyway.
Here's an acid test for the effectiveness of color schemes. Make a black-and-white photocopy of a flag design -- Haiti's blue-on-red turns out black and Estonia registers two-thirds black, one-third white; Bangladesh is black; Laos is a white circle on black background; Colombia, Czechoslovakia, Germany, for all their appeal in color, lose their identity in black-and-white versions. More bad news: you practically can't tell France from Italy from Peru from Guatemala ... or Netherlands from Transkei from Austria from Sierra Leone from Yemen, and so on. Now the good news: Canada, Greece, United States, Switzerland, United Kingdom -- all are still immediately identifiable in black-and-white, no hesitation, no mistake possible.

Stay with 2-3 colors, maximum, white counting as a color. Look at Canada, Japan, China, Switzerland, Greece, Israel, Denmark, Greenland -- all have memorable, in some cases outstanding, flags employing just 2 colors. Add one more color and voila, the brilliantly original Stars and Stripes, the British Union Jack that influenced the designs of many countries; Cuba, Panama, France, among several others, also have classic 3-color flags.

*Always keep in mind:* the flag will be reproduced on different surfaces (nylon, paper, cotton, metal, plastic) and in different sizes (outdoor flags, table flags; on newspapers, T-shirts, pins, shopping bags, balloons), hence colors should be strong and unaffected by small variations in dyes and inks. If you should ever be tempted to add a fourth color, reconsider. Above all, be pragmatic. Extra colors will increase by thousands of dollars the cost of manufacturing flags and flag souvenirs.

**Symbolism** -- Let's start with what good flag symbols are not.

*Letters, words, and numbers are not good symbols* not good symbols as flag-design currency. They're perfect for road signs, books, newspapers, advertisements. Not for flags, though. Writing on flags, like finger-painting on books, must be discouraged at an early age. There are both practical and theoretical reasons for this. From a practical view, a flag is seen from the front as well as the reverse, and the wind blows it around in unpredictable ways. As a result, what reads correctly when viewed from the front and flying left-to-right, dniw tghir-ot-tfi ni ro esrever eht morf deweiv nehw, esrow ynlo, siht ekil gnihemt nos daer. Questions?

Need a theoretical reason why words are *prosa non grata* on flags? Very well. Gently put, words are a cop-out, an admission of failure. Failure of respect, of interest, and of imagination, failure to define a meaningful symbol in an expressive way. Words on flags are the implicit confession, "We can't think of any good symbols for our community and it's not worth our bother to try." Those who respect their community do bother to try. Just glance at The Flagchart®: there are exactly 2 letters among 288 flags (Rwanda and Venda) but not a single nation bedecks its flag with words. Wonder why...

Now turn to the flags of the Union: which states have to spell out their names? Mostly those that managed to homogenize their state symbols beyond ready identification: Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oregon, Wisconsin. If you fail at symbolism,
roll in the words. (California is a happy exception).

Maps. Maps are not good flag symbols either. Maps are drawings of parts of the earth's surface. They belong on walls, in the glove compartment of your car, within a modern argonaut's reach -- just not on flags. State maps may outline a road sign -- leave them there. On flags, maps can look as strange as words do when viewed yaw gnorw eht. Quick reality check: other than Cyprus, no nation sports a map on its banner. Body parts? Sure. Animals, carpet designs, fruits, buildings? Naturally, but not maps. Not a single U.S. state could bring itself to adopt a mappy flag. That should be a hint.

Photographic representations also are not suitable as flag symbols. The former we call ... ? Precisely, photographs. Similarly, detailed artistic renderings make feckless flag symbols: the fine, colorful charges of Montana and Kansas, for example, might charm at a quilt exhibit, but they're indistinct and hence ineffective on a flag billowing in the wind 30 feet (23 m) above the ground.

Well then, after all this sound and fury, what exactly is a flag symbol? In a (symbolic) nutshell: Flag symbols are simplified, often stylized, representations of just about anything -- mineral, animal, vegetal ... and then some. Let's go to cases. Look at the sun as symbolized in the flags of Argentina, Antigua and Barbuda, Greenland, Japan, Mongolia, Namibia, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Arizona, and (on the lighter side) New York. Turn next to the lions in Luxembourg and Sri Lanka, to the bear in California, and to the dragon in Wales.

What do you think of bird representations as shown in Albania, Ciskei, Papua New Guinea, Uganda, American Samoa, Illinois, Iowa, and West Virginia (OK, there are no birds on West Virginia's flag, but can you really tell)? Consider Kenya, Lesotho, Swaziland and Oklahoma: Which shield-and-weapons representation do you like best? Is that a peace pipe or a weapon on Oklahoma's charge? How effective are the vines, leaves, and grapes on Connecticut's flag? Quickly: what does TENITSUS TILUTSNART IUQ mean? In a breeze, 30 feet off the ground, at dusk ... sorry, it's easy to get carried away.

Now that we're familiar with some of the many-splendored options for flag symbols, let's confront a central question: What qualities mark a first-rate flag symbol? No arcane mystery here. Flag-design experts have long and patiently explained that first-rate flag symbols are:

- Suggestive of the history, life, and aspirations of the community they represent;
- Visually pleasing and graphically competent;
- Immediately communicative;
- Respectful of the rules of simplicity, color, and distinctness (see below).

Turning once again to cases, among world flags Canada, United States, Norway, Japan, United Kingdom, Israel, Greenland and a few others are considered excellent. France and assorted tricolors, Cuba, Tanzania, Venezuela and many more are rated highly. Guam and Zambia need to go into thorough rethink and redesign, then return.
Among American states, Hawaii, New Mexico and Tennessee have excellent symbols. Colorado, Maryland, and Texas rate very well. New York and Kansas bring up the rear. And Connecticut? Well, it could have been worse.

**Distinctness** -- Imagine the many appearances of a flag design: on a flagpole some 30 feet (23 m) in the air, on a round balloon, on a curved mug, on the fabric folds of a polo or T-shirt, or on a coat lapel as a one-inch (2.54 cm) pin. What's more, on a flagpole the banner could billow horizontally in strong wind, flap lazily in a breeze, or hang in irregular folds on a windless day. As a small desk flag it would invariably hang. Add to these conditions the variables of sunshine or clouds, dawn or dusk, mist and rain. Conclusion? The design must be highly distinct to promote its message clearly under these manifold demands.

What exactly does distinctness mean? By now the answer is evident: *Simplicity and clarity of design; basic colors, in moderation, properly contrasted and separated; competently drawn symbols, also in moderation.* Distinctness is one quality perfectly exemplified by the dictum, "You'll know it when you'll see it." You notice it right away in Turkey, but you look for it vainly in Zambia. You can't miss it in Ohio, it's hopelessly lost in Pennsylvania. Broad brush: do a good job with simplicity, color, and symbolism -- and distinctness will take care of itself.

Nonetheless, a little finer brushwork is in order.

*Avoid curvy designs* -- favor sharp, well-defined shapes: circles, triangles & rectangles, stars, straight lines. Flag fabric, or bunting, is inherently flexible. Waving in the wind will only add further distortions, so don't burden it with design curves to boot.

Be sure symbols are large enough to be *clearly distinguishable*. If you're raring to ignore these first two counsels, may Aruba's star and Guam's central charge give you pause.

Don't mistake attractive quilts for adequate flags. Let quilts be quilts, paintings be wall art, carpets be floor coverings. And let flags be flags -- clear, simple, distinct.

**Lastly, this fine point above all:** To the hoist third be true, and it must follow as the length the width, thou wonst then charge the fly with anything. That is a cautionary paraphrase well worth minding: keep a design's center of gravity displaced toward the hoist, or flagpole end of the flag. Note, for instance, the displacement toward the hoist of the "Nordic Cross" in the flags of all Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Note also how the disk is nearer the hoist in the flags of Bangladesh, Greenland, North Korea, and Palau. And notice the position of the *soyonbo*, an ancient ideogram, in Mongolia.

There are four reasons for favoring the hoist third, three practical and a fourth related to flag protocol:

1. The end that flaps and flies in the wind (fly end) is the first to tear and become ragged so any design elements near the fly will wear out most;

2. With the fly end in motion, the eye perceives a shorter overall flag length, so an originally well-centered design will appear to slide off at the fly whereas a hoist-displaced design will seem properly centered;
(3) Under wind-still conditions, one is more likely to notice a hoist-displaced design than a centered design that might disappear under the folds;

(4) The position of highest honor in a flag is the canton or top corner of the hoist -- hence the placement there of the star-charged blue field of Old Glory. Next in honor is the one-third portion of the flag nearest the hoist, the so-called "hoist third." The fly third is the position of least honor and therefore should never charged with a design.

Having reviewed the four basic design-evaluation criteria, a final visual reference to our collection of U.S. city flags was in order. We illustrated "Simplicity" with a look at Indianapolis and Milwaukee. As one juror put it, the latter seemed "your basic nightmare of barley-stalking killer gears on water." To exemplify "Distinctness" we compared St. Louis with Detroit. No comparison, really: St. Louis's wavy golden grace and Detroit's cluttered, ill-focused mass. To demonstrate "Use of Color" we opposed the chiseled hues of Crève Coeur to the diffuse color bazaar of Cinnaminson Township. Finally, to project dissimilar ways of using symbols, we noted the simple, dignified Native American symbolism of Wichita and opposed it to San Joaquin County's cacophony of images -- a mixed metaphor for a comically mixed-up design: airplane + factory + merchant ship + submarine + cornucopia + scales + train + oil rig + storage tanks + verbiage = seal + white cloth = ¿ Flag? Case closed.