The Hawaiian Flag: Its Native Symbolism and Colors

By Patrick Kaʻanoʻi

Introduction
2016 marked the 200th anniversary of the Hawaiian flag, called Ka Hae Hawai‘i in the Hawaiian language. The flag was first commissioned by King Kamehameha the Great, who ruled the independent kingdom of Hawai‘i from 1795–1819. As will be seen, the flag served not only a political purpose but also played a role in the traditional religious and ethical observances of the Hawaiian people.

From its founding in 1795 to 1816, the Kingdom of Hawai‘i had no national banner, but instead flew a British Union Jack and pennant as temporary standards. The Union Jack and pennant were given to Kamehameha—then the ali‘i nui, or ruling chief, of the islands of Hawai‘i, Maui, Lana‘i, Kaho‘olawe and Moloka‘i—by Captain George Vancouver in 1793 to symbolize Great Britain’s commitment to establish a protectorate over the kingdom.¹ (Such a protectorate was never confirmed by Vancouver’s superiors, and Hawai‘i remained independent.) Vancouver was not the first European to visit Hawai‘i; he had been preceded by Captain James Cook and his crew in 1778.

In 1816, Kamehameha I officially adopted a flag with the Union Jack in the canton and a number of white, red, and blue stripes. During the following years from 1816 to 1845 the number of the flag’s stripes and order of the colors varied (figures 4, 5, and 6). On May 20, 1845, King Kamehameha III Kauʻikeaʻoolii (ruled from 1825–1854), set the official standard as eight alternating white, red and blue stripes; the design of the flag has remained unchanged until this day (figure 1).²

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Editor’s Note / Note de la rédaction

In his “Fundamental Theses of Vexillology,” Whitney Smith observed that many vexillologists are tempted to focus on the “outward forms” of flags, rather than considering the significance a flag has in the political system for which it is a symbol.1 One of the difficulties in discerning a flag’s symbolic significance is that sources of non-visual data, that may disclose the state of mind of those viewing the flag in its native habitat, are not as easily discovered as pictures and specifications of physical flags. With that in mind, I’m pleased to report that this issue of Flag Research Quarterly offers two works that provide important insights into the ways flags are perceived in their home countries.

Drawing upon his extensive research into Native Hawaiian beliefs and myths, Patrick Ka‘anōi addresses what may be the most misunderstood flag in the world, the Hawaiian flag. His review of the ways that Ka Hae Hawai‘i, with its outward form of a British Union Jack, may also call to mind sacred symbols of the Native Hawaiian religion and culture is a reminder that the same shapes do not signify similarly to all viewers.

Scot Guenter’s contribution is an important data set about the perceptions of the United States flag among a cohort of young Americans. As a follow-up to a similar study he ran three decades ago, his survey illuminates the fact that the symbolic importance of a flag may shift over time, even within the same polity. This is an important reminder to those who study historical vexillology.

Both these pieces call to mind a semi-recurring feature that Smith, as editor of The Flag Bulletin, used to run: flag field reports. Correspondents of The Flag Bulletin who travelled would take careful notes and pictures of the flags they saw displayed, and the contexts in which they flew. They then shared their observations with the readers of that publication. I would welcome similar contributions for Flag Research Quarterly. As you have the opportunity to visit new places, please keep your camera and notebook handy, and send in your reports. The editors of Flag Research Quarterly will be delighted to help shape your notes into an article.

Steven A. Knowlton
Co-editor, FRQ


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While many casual observers see resemblances between the Hawaiian flag and those of British colonies or European powers, the design initiated by Kamehameha the Great and finally codified by his second son represented Native Hawaiian ideas through the interpretation of its colors, numbers, design, and symbolism. An exploration of those Hawaiian meanings provides an additional facet to the historical understanding of Ka Hae Hawai‘i.

A Flag is Born: The Russian Affair

On May 21, 1816, King Kaumuali‘i (ruled from 1794–1824), ali‘i of the island of Kaua‘i and reluctant vassal of King Kamehameha I, signed a document placing himself and his island under the rule and flag of Russia, for the purposes of detaching his island from the Hawaiian kingdom. This development was initiated by a German doctor, Georg Anton Schäffer, who served as an agent for the Russian American Company.3

Carrying a document signed by Kaumuali‘i, which authorized the Russian claim to the island of Kaua‘i, Schäffer proceeded to the island of O‘ahu to boldly challenge King Kamehameha I and his authority over all the islands. After entering Honolulu Harbor, Shäffer “built a blockhouse and raised the Russian flag, and is said to have laid out the ground plan for a fort.”4

The event that aroused the hostility and concern of Kamehameha I was the entrance of Shäffer and/or his subordinates (the historical record is not clear) into a lono heiau (temple) at Honolulu Harbor, in violation of the customary rules of kapu, which restricted all but a few elites from entering holy places (figure 2).5 After hearing of this intrusion, King Kamehameha I sent several ali‘i to order “that the Russians should quit the islands instantly, and if they did not depart quietly that force must be used.” The Russians quietly retreated, and so ended the Russian affair of 1816.6

After the retreat of the Russians, Kamehameha I commissioned an Englishman, John Young, to build a fort called Kehuanohu at Honolulu Harbor. King Kamehameha I then appointed Captain George Beckley as its first commandant, and charged Beckley with creating a unique flag for the Kingdom of Hawai‘i.7 Beckley is credited with fabricating the first Hawaiian flag.

The First Mentions of the Hawaiian Flag

The first record of this flag is from a Russian sailor, Lieutenant Otto von Kotzebue, who had no knowledge of Schäffer’s plot. During a visit to the islands on November 27, 1816, he noted in his log, “In the harbour [Honolulu] was a fort from which Tamaahmaah’s [King Kamehameha I] flag was displayed.”

In the same year, the artist Louis Choris made a colored sketch of the port of Honolulu (figure 3); the sketch was preparatory for a lithograph which appeared in his 1822 book Voyage Pittoresque Autour du Monde (Illustrated Trip Around the World) (figure 4). The sketch lacks the fine details of the completed work, and the curator of the Honolulu Museum of Art, Theresa Papanikolas, can discern only six stripes in the sketch (figure 5).9 The lithograph shows seven stripes (figure 6).

While in the 1816 sketch it is difficult to discern the Union Jack, in the 1822 lithograph the Union Jack is shown at the bottom of the flag. I speculate that this is because the Hawaiians were fearful that the Russians would return, and so displayed the inverted flag as a sign of distress, to signal ships of other nations that they were in need of immediate assistance.
Recorded Observations of the Hawaiian Flag, 1816–1848

A list of historical Hawaiian flag descriptions was included in a report published in 1905 by the Hawaiian Historical Society. They report a varying number of designs, including:

- nine stripes, with a Union Jack (1816) (figure 7 and 8)
- nine stripes, with a Union Jack flying upside down (1816)
- nine stripes, without a Union Jack (also 1816, but flown from a different fort)
- seven stripes, red, white, blue, red, white, blue, and red, signifying seven islands, and in the corner a Union (1818)
- nine alternate white, red, and blue bands with a Union Jack, white stripe on top (1819)
- nine alternately dark and light stripes with a Union Jack across the top five stripes (colors not indicated) (1823) (figure 9)
- Seven red and white stripes, with a Union Jack across the top three stripes (1824)
- Nine red and white stripes with a Union Jack across the top five stripes (ca. 1824)
- Seven red and white stripes with a Union Jack (1825)
- Stripes of blue, white, and red, with a Union Jack (1826)
- Seven red, white, and blue stripes, with a Union Jack (1832) (figure 10)
- Stripes of red and white with a Union Jack (1840)
- Seven red and white stripes, with a Union Jack lacking blue (ca. 1837–1845)
- And, finally, in 1845 the current pattern of the flag was established by law.

Symbolism: The Promise of Lono

Virtually every visitor to Hawai‘i, and many a curious mind outside the state, asks the question, “Why is there a British Union Jack in the Hawaiian flag?”

The basic answer is that, because Britain was the first European country to encounter the Hawaiian islands in 1778, and because Britain and Hawai‘i maintained good relations, Kamehameha I chose to incorporate the British Union Jack
as part of his national Hawaiian flag design. However, there is a context of Hawaiian flag design that can only be understood through Hawaiian cultural beliefs and history.

As seen in the Russian Affair of 1816, the Hawaiian kingdom until 1819 was governed under a religious/ethical system which observed *kapu* (this word is related to the English word “taboo”). This system required that any new decision regarding the creation or interpretation of religious or secular cultural symbolism would be managed and filtered thru pre-Western/pre-Christian beliefs. With this in mind, we can consider the Native Hawaiian interpretation of seeing Captain James Cook’s squadron of ships as they sailed into view on January 18, 1778, and how would that affect their interpretation of the British flag.

Cook’s ships, Resolution and Discovery, arrived off the northeast coast of Kaua’i during the four-month festival Makahiki, celebrating the god Lono. During the New Year celebration of Lono-i-ka-makahiki (Lono of the New Year), Lono is represented by a small balled figure at the top of a crossed pole draped with white bark cloth (*tapa* or *kapa* cloth) (figure 11). According to Hawaiian myth, Lono had sailed away in the ancient past in a triangular shaped craft called a *piama lau* and said that he would return in a floating temple or *heiau*.11

Many Hawaiians interpreted the arrival of Cook as fulfillment of the prophecy in which the return of Lono, the messenger god, was anticipated and long-awaited. One may imagine that the historical encounter between Cook and the Native Hawaiians produced an unfathomable feeling of stunned amazement and ecstasy similar to a modern American experiencing an ancient cosmonaut returning from a multi-century mission into the cosmos.

The Hawaiian artist, Herb Kane, who is famous for his historical maritime paintings of Hawaiian history, has captured his interpretation of the moment when Native Hawaiians came to interpret the colors, symbols, season and meaning of Captain Cook’s arrival to the islands. The white banner is mounted on a staff topped with a carving of the image of Lono (figure 12).

Hawaiians saw in Cook’s ship the emblems of Lono-i-ka-Makahiki:

- The ships appeared as two floating temples
- The sails appeared as the white cloth on a staff representing Lono
- The Red Ensign with its Union Jack in the canton appeared as red banners showing crossed *ali‘a* (spears) and *puela* (triangular flags), which are the *kapu* images and colors of a high chief (figures 13 & 14).12 (This compound symbol of was later incorporated into the Hawai‘i Coat of Arms [figures 16 and 17]). The red banner also recalled the *ʻahuʻula*, or cloaks made of red feathers of the *ʻi‘iwi* bird, worn exclusively by *ali‘i*.

Bearing these resemblances in mind, it is possible to interpret the esteem in which the British flag was held by Kamehameha I as a reflection not merely of geopolitical realities, but also of respect for a symbol of chiefly status delivered by a returning god.

**Religious Significance of the Colors and Numbers in the Hawaiian Flag**

The colors of the British, and subsequent Hawaiian flags—red, white, and blue—also held religious significance to Hawaiians, as did the number eight. The color and numerical
symbolism understood by Native Hawaiians during the pre-Christian religious system were primarily based on dualism and the multiple of twos. Having no written language, Hawaiians used a memory device that observed parallels between human affairs and natural phenomena, and assigned male and female characteristics to the physical world.

Light colors were male and dark colors were female, and the same ideas were applied to the environment—the sun was male and the deep blue sea was female; the stars were male and the darkness of night was female. This philosophy is called dualism. As George Huʻeʻu Sanford Kanahele explains, “Dualism refers to the idea that all phenomena in our universe are organized in pairs of opposites: night and day, light and darkness, water and land, large and small, left and right, male and female, good and bad, and so on and on.” He observes that “the ‘grand motif’ of Chinese art and science, the Yin-Yang symbol, is the perfect symbol for this duality” (figure 15). In Hawaiian philosophy, the concept of dualism is expressed as aʻo and pō (light and darkness).

The Colors White, Red, and Blue

The dualist understanding of nature makes the colors dark blue and white highly significant, representing as they do the male and female natures of the natural world surrounding the Hawaiians who first saw the British flag. My colleague, retired U.S. National Park Ranger, Ernest Young, Sr., noted that a traditional account of the selection of colors accords with Hawaiian traditions of dualism, and an additional symbolic attribution of meaning to the color red.

In 1899, James Girvin reported the following story of the flag’s adoption:

The inventor of the flag was no doubt the King [Kamehameha I], himself, and the maker of it under his directions, was Captain Geo. C. Beckley, an Englishman who had been made a high chief, and whose descendants are still amongst us. He [King Kamehameha I] ordered white, symbolical of purity and sincerity, for the uppermost stripe, nothing being higher than the sun from whence emanates the brilliant white light by which all things are discerned. The King ordered red as the color for the second bar, as it was a color very highly prized by the people, it being symbolical of blood, “which is the life.” He ordered blue for the lowermost stripe, blue being a symbol of continuity, in the hope that his Kingdom would continue forever. From the azure vault of heaven which encircles the globe and from the deep blue sea which encircles the Islands his idea of continuity was obtained.

Young observes the concordance of the tradition with Hawaiian dualism. White, which Kamehameha associated with the sun, represents the male aspect of nature. Blue, which Kamehameha found reminiscent of the night sky and the sea, represents the female aspect. And red, while not part of the dualist symbolism, also reflects the Hawaiian concern with the relation between humans and nature, as red recalls the blood which is necessary for all living things to survive.

The Number of Stripes

The number of stripes in the Hawaiian flag was fixed after 1845 to represent the eight major islands of Hawai‘i. However, Hawaiians have another understanding of the number of stripes, which is related to elements of pre-Christian Hawaiian thought. Just as the number two holds significance as a representative of dualist thought, so also the number four is important as a token of the four founding Na Aku (divine ancestors) who were said to have established Hawaiian culture.

Keeping in mind the value of Native Hawaiian color symbolism under the kapu religious system, the meaning and value of the number of stripes in the Hawaiian flag also takes on purposeful reasons in its design. Given the principal value of dualism and the value of the even number four, multiples of four are referred to in traditional chants, such as, “Invoke we now the 40,000 gods, the 400,000 gods, the 4,000 gods.”

It is therefore curious that the early number of stripes of the Hawaiian flag included the odd numbers of 7 and 9 stripes. I have found no definitive answer to why these odd numbers of stripes were used prior to 1845. However, there is one possible insight to this curiosity that comes from Kamehameha I himself in regard to his wife Kaʻahumanu (1768–1832).

After the conquest of the island kingdoms of Hawai‘i, Maui (including the islands of Lāna‘i, Kaho‘olawe and Moloka‘i), and the sixth island of O‘ahu in 1795, Kamehameha is noted to have said these words regarding Kaʻahumanu (1768–1832): “‘Six of Kamehameha’s islands are free to you, but the seventh is kapu, and is for me alone.’ This was uttered by Kamehameha after O‘ahu was conquered in 1795. The six islands from Hawai‘i to O‘ahu, which included Maui, Moloka‘i, Lāna‘i, and Kaho‘olawe, belonged to his people. But the seventh ‘island,’ his wife Kaʻahumanu, was forbidden. Anyone who attempted to take her from him would be put to death.”

These historical references give some credence to the theory that a flag of seven stripes would have represented the six islands first conquered by Kamehameha prior to 1810, plus the metaphorical island who Kamehameha referenced as his queen Kaʻahumanu. With the conquest of the fourth island kingdom of Kaua‘i (that included the islands of Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau), two more islands were added for a total of eight islands. By adding the metaphorical “island” of Kaʻahumanu, the Hawaiian Islands totaled nine, justifying the nine stripes of the Hawaiian flag. It would be reasonable to conclude that
after the death of Kaʻahumanu in 1831, the Hawaiian flag would revert to eight stripes under Kamehameha III, representing the geographical eight islands of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i in 1845.

**Hawaiian Royal Arms**

As previously discussed, the Union Jack recalls important royal symbols. One may see these symbols more clearly in the arms of the Hawaiian kingdom. These arms were originally created in London in 1843–44 at the order of Timothy Haʻililo and the Reverend William Richards, and have a European interpretation of the male figures as well as their helmets and the petal-like design of the puleʻuloʻu (kapu staff of a high chief).

The arms were reported in *The Polynesian* newspaper in 1845 (figure 16):

> A coat of arms has also been adopted which is quarterly, first and fourth stripes of the National banner, second and third or [yellow or gold], a ball argent [silver or white] on a staff sable [black] - in escutcheon vert [green], triangular banner [vexilloid] argent, leaning on a cross saltire.

The white ball with which the second and third quarters are charged, was an ancient emblem of the country called Puloulou and they were placed at the right and left of the gateway, or door, of the King's [paramount chief] house, to indicate protection, or a place of refuge, to which persons might flee from danger and be safe.

The triangular flag at the fess point, was an ancient flag [vexilloid] of the Hawaiian chiefs which was raised at sea, above the sail of their canoes, and the sail at that time being of a peculiar construction, it presented a very beautiful appearance. It was also placed in a leaning position, across two spears in front of the King's house, to indicate both kapu [taboo] and protection. The name of the flag was Puela and name of the cross on which it lies Alia.

Both the balls and the flag had on some occasions a religious signification, but their appropriateness to a coat of arms results from the above characteristics.

The external ornaments of the escutcheon consist of a crest, which is a crown and two supporters, men clad in the ancient feather cloak and helmet of the Islands, the one bearing a kahili [vexilloid] and the other a spear as in the processions of former times. The crown is ornamented with the taro leaf. The drawings of all these emblems and ornaments was taken from the original articles presented to Captain Cook by [King] Kaleiopuu in 1778. The design was original by the lamented Haalilio.

The motto is, ‘*Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono.*’ The life of the land is perpetuated by righteousness. It refers to the speech of the King [Kamehameha III] at the time of cession, Feb. 25, 1843. ‘I have given away the life of the land. I have hope that the life of the land will be restored when my conduct is justified.’ It very naturally alludes to the righteousness of the British government, in returning the Island to their legal sovereign, to the righteousness of the Hawaiian which secured the restoration, and to the general principle, that it is only by righteousness that national existence is preserved.18

A more recent rendition of the arms makes the supporters appear as Hawaiians rather than as Europeans, and shows the kahili and puleʻuloʻu drawn as they were crafted in Hawai‘i. Figure 17 adds labels to the arms, showing each element with its Hawaiian name.

**Plants and Vexilloids**

Of interest to the discussion of the Hawaiian flag are the alia and puela in the arms, which the Union Jack recalls. Puela are considered vexilloids, or non-traditional flags. The triangular design of the puela can be viewed as an integral part of the British Union Jack design. However, I can find no existing
The shape of these plants may be compared to drawings of the *puela* in the Royal Arms, and also seen in the Union Jack.

**Conclusion**

The Hawaiian flag, while it superficially resembles a British colonial flag, incorporates into its design many elements of Hawaiian religion and culture. It is still the belief of many contemporary Native Hawaiians that the Hawaiian flag is the flag of the god Lono and that Captain Cook was personified as a Lono of the New Year, and not a mistaken false god as Western historians would interpret in their historical account. The flag, therefore, is not simply a flag for the state but also a flag of Lono, the peacemaker, the messenger. It is an appropriate “garment for the people of Hawai‘i” and symbol of the spirit of *aloha*. In its Union Jack is seen the sacred *kaʻu* of the crossed *ʻalaʻa* spears and triangular standard of a *puela*. All this is what can be seen from a Native Hawaiian perspective.

**Acknowledgements**

The late Dr. Whitney Smith was my first contact and confidante on my journey of discovery. His support and advice has been a valued foundation for me as an individual and member of the North American Vexillological Association. I would also like to thank Gus Tracchia, Ted Kaye, and Steven A. Knowlton for their continuing inspiration. The interests we all have, and studies we undertake, as members of NAVA have many facets, drawing upon many cultural resources and talents. I look forward to a continuing relationship and would like to share this guiding principle of my ancestors: “‘Aʻohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau hoʻokahi – All knowledge is not taught in the same school.” We can learn from many sources.

This paper was originally presented on October 12, 2013 at the 47th Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association in Salt Lake City.

2 The Polynesians, May 31, 1845.
4 Ibid., vol. 1, 57-58.
7 Ibid., vol. 1, 58.
9 Theresa Papenikolas to the author, August 26, 2014.
12 From *The Polynesians*, May 31, 1845: “The triangular flag at the fess point, was an ancient flag [vexilloid] of the Hawaiian chiefs which was raised at sea, above the sail of their canoes, and the sail at that time being of a peculiar construction, it presented a very beautiful appearance. It was also placed in a leaning position, across two spears in front of the King’s house, to indicate both tabu [taboo] and protection. The name of the flag was Puela and name of the cross on which it lies Alia”.
16 Kanahele, *Kā Kanaka*, 70.
19 Mary Kawene Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 145. Lynton Dove White notes that the *ki* “is considered sacred to the Hawai‘i‘an god Lono and to the goddess of the hula, Laka. It is also an emblem of high rank and divine power. The Hawai‘i‘an feather kalahu is said to have been inspired by this plant.” Although the description of the kahili vexilloid has survived, it seems that there are no extant examples to compare to the plant. (Lynton Dove White, “‘Ki’”, in *Canoe Plants of Ancient Hawai‘i*, www.canoeplants.com/ki.html.)
College Students, the American Flag, and other Powerful Patriotic Symbols: Results of a Survey

By Scot M. Guenter

Introduction
At the Twenty-second Annual Meeting of NAVA, held in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in October 1988, I gave a talk entitled "Flag Recognition and Evocation: American College Students Respond to a Vexillological Survey."¹ That talk was based upon data collected in the final section of a survey I had conducted in the spring of 1988, which set out to be “the first vexillological survey that combines questions on recognition, evocation, cultural values, and nationalism as it is demonstrated through flag ritual.”² The final section of that survey zeroed in specifically upon college students’ knowledge of American flag history, their opinions on some controversial arguments over appropriate flag usage, and within the panoply of symbols that are used to evoke and represent America, how they might rank and group other symbols beyond the most obvious, the American flag.

Twenty-seven years later, in the spring of 2015, I gave the same survey to 200 current American college students. Although the data from that original 1988 talk in Portsmouth is temporarily inaccessible, once it becomes available it will provide a baseline against which to compare the 2015 survey data. Even without the original 1988 data, the current findings provide fascinating data that tell us many useful things about these current students’ knowledge of the U.S. flag, their perceptions of America, and their levels of patriotism. This 2015 survey provides a baseline for future such surveys of American college students, and it offers information for cross-cultural analysis of any subsequent parallel studies of flag knowledge and nationalism among students in other countries.

Now is a splendid time to gather these data about contemporary students, the leaders of tomorrow; it is crucial for the field of vexillology to promote the methodologically sound procedure of using surveys in an appropriately social scientific manner—as opposed to just gathering data from open internet survey posts, often anonymous or frequented by folks with a specific agenda, and declaring it somehow magically valid or representative.³ Surveys should not be rigged, though they often are; examples of rigged surveys were often seen in the call-in surveys taken during partisan shows like The O’Reilly Factor on Fox and The Ed Show on MSNBC, or in the political “push poll” phone calls that claim to be impartial but are really using the illusion of a survey format to frame the questions and the answer options to give the respondent a heavy dose of campaigning slanted in a particular direction. When a researcher prepares and administers a survey correctly, the results may not be as expected or hypothesized, which is why it is necessary to undertake such projects—valid data is evidence to make us rethink assumptions.

The Study
I used the same model for the 2015 survey as I did for the study conducted in 1988. It was a six-page survey with four sections:

1. Background Information
2. Focalization and Evocation
3. Flag Identification
4. U.S. Flag Information (see Appendix).

The second and third sections provided data which were analyzed in a separate essay, while the first and fourth sections provided the evidence for this study.⁴ The main difference between the two surveys was the sample population. For the 1988 survey, I used a sample of approximately twenty-five students from each of four schools in the East, two in the South, one in the Midwest, and one in the West. These institutions included some elite, smaller, private colleges, as well as large state universities.

I drew the 200 participants in the 2015 study from a different population. Over the last few decades, the process for social scientific surveys at universities has become more formalized, in that anyone seeking to use human subjects must win approval from a regimented and regulated Human Subjects Research—Institutional Review Board (IRB). “IRB members make sure that the proposed research is in compliance with university policy and federal regulations established to ensure the safety of research participants and the ethical and responsible conduct of investigators. If you plan on pursuing research with human participants either through direct interaction (interviews, surveys, observation, experimental interventions, etc.) or through the use of private records about individuals, a protocol must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before the research begins.”⁵
This is all to the good, and I was happy to get peer review and approval of my protocol this time, as this helped affirm and reinforce the validity of my process, but this institutional requirement precluded my getting proxies to administer the survey in the more casual manner used back in 1988. Then, I could get friends of mine who were teachers at other colleges to have their students take the surveys and then mail them back to me; now, to ensure anonymity of all participants, I had to closely supervise the gathering and protection of data, and all assistants and collaborators needed to be identified and approved by my university system before the process could even begin. Although the sample was again 200 students participating in the spring (almost all in April) of 2015, they were all from my own large state university, San Jose State. The dissemination of the surveys to my pre-approved collaborators and their subsequent return directly to me was carefully monitored.

I cannot claim this current response speaks for all American college students any more than the last one did, but I should point out that the California State University is a collection of twenty-three campuses; it has recently granted its three millionth degree, and one out of every twenty college graduates in the United States holds a CSU degree; and this survey does reflect the population of students at San Jose State, which was the first and “flagship” campus for the California State University system. They mirror the rich diversity of California—a diversity that is increasingly present in the rest of America (figure 1).

**The Respondents**

So, who are the students who took the survey? To ensure a variety of students, they were purposely drawn from lower division general education classes as well as senior seminar capstone courses in fields that have mixtures of both majors and minors. They listed more than fifty different majors, with those in the broad fields of Engineering and Business having the most participants. 56% listed their gender as male, 42% as female, 2% did not respond. (In the 1988 survey, 45.5% were male, 55.5% female). This current cohort demonstrated greater diversity in several ways. Although none were so identified in the earlier survey, 8.5% of these students were not U.S. citizens, with Mexico (5) and the Philippines (3) being the most represented nationalities, along with Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Gabon, Ethiopia, Belgium, China, and the Netherlands. (A reminder that not all students at American colleges are Americans.) Given a choice of White, African American, Asian American, Native American, and Other, only 32% identified themselves exclusively as White in this survey, whereas 90.5% did in 1988. 31.5% of the respondents listed their race/ethnicity as Asian American, 15% as Latino, 3% as African American. 10% self-identified as some mix of these traditional categories.

20% were first-year students, 32.5% sophomores, 22% juniors, and 25.5% seniors. When asked to list religious affiliation, if any, in 1988 25% left it blank; this time 42% did. Of those who did respond, Roman Catholic, as before, got the most responses at 27%, followed by the general Christian at 19.5%, Buddhist at 3.5%, Atheist and Agnostic at 2.5% each, Protestant at 2%, Hindu at 1.5%, and Lutheran and Spiritual both at 1%. Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, Shia Muslim and Sikh each had one response. What can we draw from this? Today’s students are less observant overall, and vaguer about their categorization when they are.

They are also older. In a report on the 1988 survey, I noted that “shifting demographics have required many American institutions of higher education to cater to older and returning students as the baby boomers continue to age.” In the twenty-first century, and with the current economic situation and cost of living, older students are increasingly the norm in America as many juggle working and going to school at the same time.

**TABLE 1: Age of Respondents**

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<th>AGE</th>
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<td>44</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25−29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30−39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40−49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50−70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the 1980’s, it was the conservative Age of Reagan, and the student survey reflected this, with 49.2% describing themselves as Republican and 31.7% as Democrat. This time, almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) expressed no affiliation, and another 3.5% labeled themselves Independent. This survey was done in the San Francisco Bay area, during President Obama’s administration. Republicans drew only 4.5%, while Democrats got 24.5%. Libertarians got 1.5%,
Green Party and Centralists got 1% each, and the following categories each had one respondent out of 200: Progressive, Conservative, National Action Party of Mexico.

When asked to rate their social class on a scale of 1-5, the students in 1988 clearly identified themselves as more privileged, with a self-ranking of upper class 7%, upper middle class 45.2%, middle middle class 39.7%, lower middle class 7%, lower class 1%. It appears the impact of the Great Recession still lingers, as in the 2015 survey students ranked themselves, going in the other direction, lower class 9%, lower middle class 27%, middle middle class 45%, upper middle class 17.5%, and upper class 1%. It is an interesting coincidence that, in a time when “the 1%” has become a phrase evoking some animosity for those at the very top in American society, only 1% of these students rank themselves there.

In 1988, the most popular television show of the students taking the survey was L.A. Law, closely followed by Cheers and thirtysomething. With the proliferation of channels to choose from and ways to access programming in the twenty-first century, contemporary students listed a far wider range of programs as individual selections, suggesting there are increasingly fewer programs one can assume everyone follows or will be willing to discuss. Also telling is the fact that the most popular program now, Game of Thrones, is accessed through a premium channel (HBO) or via illegal download, and the second most favorite, House of Cards, is distributed through the internet (via Netflix), bypassing traditional television.

U.S. Flag Meaning and Creation

The first part of this section asked questions probing the students’ understanding of what the different parts of the U.S. flag symbolize and just who designed it. The initial three questions asked respondents whether the stripes, the stars, and the flag colors had particular meaning assigned by the government of the United States—and if so, what these were. A total of 93% said the stripes did have a specific meaning, and those that chose to elaborate correctly identified the thirteen original colonies that became the first United States. The number answering yes on the stars went up to 97%; all, when explaining the meaning, correctly identifying the symbolism as the number of states in the Union (figure 2).

Perhaps because of the order of the questions, and the nearly universal correct response on special meanings intended for the stars and stripes in the first two questions, some respondents were no doubt predisposed to answer the third question the same way—that the colors have special, specific meanings assigned by the government, even though we as vexillologists know they do not. As the civil religion of America grew in the nineteenth century, and the cult of the flag took hold, more and more young people were taught in school that the Red, White, and Blue did have very specific symbolic meanings, and the dissemination of poems, songs, and homilies in this regard continued throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Therefore, 74% of the respondents incorrectly answered that these colors did have specific meanings assigned by the government. Within that smaller group, however, 56% confessed that although they thought there were official meanings, they themselves did not know what they were. Implicit in this response is a belief among students that a culture of patriotism exists in the society around them but that they themselves are not very well grounded in it. Among the range of responses about what the colors signify, the word that turned up the most, referencing any color or all of them, was “freedom,” occurring in 29% of the written responses. For connecting a specific color to a specific symbolic meaning, the clear winner was matching red with “the blood of sacrifice,” with 28% offering such an interpretation. This was often, but not always, grouped with white for “purity” or “peace.” Blue had the least consistency, with such possibilities as “valor,” “honor,” and “courage.”

One unexpected response, which makes sense upon reflection, was the noteworthy 6% who interpreted the colors as showing national unity at the time the country was created. The Founding Fathers decided to blend the assigned colors of the three political groups that make up the nation: thus, red is for Republicans, blue is for Democrats, and white is for Independents. I laughed the first time I saw this, but when it occurred again and again, I thought about it from the students’ perspective: they were raised in a postmodern society that encourages and cultivates ahistorical associations, and in their life experience, when one watches Election Night returns in the media, the red/blue dichotomy is emphasized, and for years in our political analysis discourse it has been common to refer to “red states” or “blue states”—and to describe those with toss-up potential as “purple states” (figure 3). The historian in me shudders a bit as I reflect that increasing numbers of Americans think that these categories have always existed in this nation and that the two-party
system is mandated, not a historical development.

The fourth question on the survey asked simply: “Who designed the American flag?” The purpose of this question was to see how many had heard of and remembered the name of Francis Hopkinson, and what kind of endurance the Betsy Ross tale of origin had among Millennials fifteen years into the twenty-first century.

Not a single respondent credited Francis Hopkinson with the design of the American flag. Out of the 200 students surveyed, 114 did not answer this question, and among the 86 that did, 35 wrote down “Betsy Ross”. An additional 5 probably intended her but were a bit off, with one “Betsy Johnson”, three “Betty”, and one memorable “Bette Davis” (figure 4). This accounted for 47% of the replies. The only other frequent response was the nondescript “a woman” (27%), reflecting memories of the strong role that gender has in the story. The next highest response was 5 votes for Martha Washington, followed by Susan B. Anthony and “a student” each getting 3 votes. The student reference no doubt indicates the persistence and success of the campaign Robert G. Heft of Ohio waged to credit himself as designer of the 50 star U.S. flag (when, actually, in the long process of committee review and design selection, more than 1500 submissions were made and at least three were exact replicas of the chosen selection, and at the time, the government credited the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry for the design).14 In addition, “Founding Fathers” and “Thomas Jefferson” got one response each—as did, in what I hope was an act of precocious sarcasm, “Pablo Picasso.”

Evocation of Patriotism

The next question on the survey probed when and how students associated the American flag with profound feelings of patriotism, if they ever did feel such emotional stirrings. It was phrased thus: “Have you ever had a deep sense of pride when looking at the American flag?” Students could check Yes or No. This was followed by “If Yes, please give a specific instance or context that comes to mind.”

Only 57% of the respondents checked Yes. 43% could not recall such an emotional response. If students are being honest, that is a noticeably low level of response, and one that should concern members of the society who believe patriotism and a strong, shared civil religion are integral to maintaining a healthy and much-needed shared sense of community for the future good and ongoing cohesion of the society. This finding corroborates a point made by Alexandra Petrie of the Washington Post.

On The Colin McEnroe Show in July 2015, she reported that in a recent survey done by American National Election Studies, Millennials, when compared to those of earlier generational cohorts, score 20% lower on a question inquiring if seeing an American flag flying makes you feel good or happy.15

Among the students who did give specific responses here, the answers were divided between those who followed the prompt and described a social context engendering the evocation of this strong emotional response (62%) and a considerable number (37%) who just wrote down an abstract term, perhaps to embody or try to label what they were feeling or thinking when they saw the flag. These were often vague and varied widely: one mentioned a faith that America was becoming more inclusive, another simply put, with a big exclamation mark, the Internet meme ‘Murica! (Internet slang for redneck displays of violent, unthinking, ethnocentric nationalism).16 The most often recurring term here was the word “freedom” which was substantive in more than a quarter of all the vague, abstract responses. This replicates the high level of selection of “freedom” for what they thought the colors symbolized.

Among the 62 responses that included some sort of a contextual answer when recollecting how their patriotism was evoked, particularly powerful institutional forces in the process of this enculturation were apparent. References to the military appeared in 29% of all the responses, and again and again, family connections to the military were cited as powerful forces in the triggering for many, including references to a grandfather’s funeral, a wife’s deployment, a brother, husband, or best friend being sent overseas, and a father’s tales of his experiences. A few direct references to the Reserve Officer Training Corps experience, whether in high school or college, were included as well (figure 5).

Sporting events tied with the military at 29% as the most frequent response, and again the references varied. For most it was as spectators; both live events and televised Olympic or other international events were often mentioned (figure 6). Others specifically wrote about feeling patriotism when they heard the anthem and they themselves were the athletes about to compete (or on the award stand), and another wrote of feeling it while being the musician performing at such a public ritual.
The next highest-ranking category for socializing this culture of patriotism was school events, garnering 13%. Also, connected to this in a way I hadn’t predicted, 3% of the responses described being socialized into a culture of patriotism during grade school activities but having lost any such former feeling by this point in their lives. Other recurring responses included 6% mentioning the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, 5% mentioning Scouting ceremonies, 3% recalling the Fourth of July, and 3% specifically describing immigrants gaining status as newly accepted members of the society, through naturalization or permanent residency.

**Two Flag Controversies**

Another way to gauge how students feel about the national flag was to ask their opinion on what its appropriate usage might be. The next two questions on the survey explored student opinions on the issues of flag burning as protected free speech and the use of the Pledge of Allegiance in all public schools. Asked, “Should there be a law against burning the American flag as a sign of protest?” they were clearly divided, for 49% said “Yes” and 51% said “No” (figure 7). The slight edge for the “No” category might be because the Bay Area is traditionally progressive, and is therefore a region more likely to put the individual’s right to free speech on a slightly higher level of regard than the need to show conformity and respect for traditional symbols. Asked, “Should children learn and recite the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary school?” a majority said “Yes”—but only 56%. We do not have data to ascertain why 44% felt this practice should be discontinued. It could be because of their own personal experiences with it, or it could be because they see it as ineffective in what it proposes to do. In either case, the fact that so many think it should be dropped is another indication of a growing lack of cohesion in a shared sense of an American culture of patriotism, and a willingness among these students, almost all of them Millennials, to move to a different identity relationship with the nation-state.

**Symbols of America**

The final point of the survey was to get a sense of what symbols beyond the American flag evoked the idea of the United States for these students, and to see if the symbols that are part of American civil religion are changing. Which symbols were most important? What older symbols seemed to be on the wane? What new ones were becoming more influential and ubiquitous? Getting a better understanding of this hierarchy of symbols can help us as vexillologists in assessing contemporary images, memes, or writings in which the flag is associated with these other symbols or integrated with them in different ways.

Here is the prompt the students were given: “Besides the American flag, what are the top three symbols that represent the United States of America that come to your mind?” All responses were tabulated and given a numerical equivalence: any choice in the first slot got three points; in the second slot, two points; in the third slot, one point. This system allows us to credit the hierarchy of importance not only of an individual student’s response, but also the repetition among all the students. This method is adapted from the Borda Count Method, “often used for things like polls which rank sporting teams or academic institutions.” The recent New Zealand national flag referenda also used this method.

The following table summarizes the symbols that were named and their ranks in the hierarchy of resonance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statue of Liberty</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollar Sign/Money</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army Logo/Military</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatty Foods/Fast Foods/Hamburgers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDonalds</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle Sam</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom (of Expression)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat people</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red, White, and Blue</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty Bell</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Washington</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California/California Bear</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireworks</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt. Rushmore</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Dogs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Monument</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitol Building</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confederate flag</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowboys</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration of Independence</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Memorial</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear weapons</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5. Students in the Air Force ROTC program at Vanden High School, Fairfield, California. Source: http://www.dailyrepublic.com/solano-news/fairfield/fairfield-to-honor-vets-on-sunday-with-ceremony-and-parade**

**Figure 6. A giant U.S. flag, displayed before a professional football game in 2016. Source: http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-week-in-texas/texas-remembers-911**

**Figure 7. Protesters burn a U.S. flag in 2012. Source: Jeff Siegel, thevillager.com, September 13, 2012.**
### TABLE 2: Civil Religious Symbols Named by Students on Survey of American Flag and Culture, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock music</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>State Seals</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan War</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple Pie</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Twin Towers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Servings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>All for one</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branches of Government</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beaches</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasians</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bill of Rights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem./Rep. symbols</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Capitalism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drones</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Captain America</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth of July</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chevrolet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global policeman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fists</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Gate Bridge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Freedom Tower</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Poppy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Landmark Plaque</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hollywood</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Huge National Debt</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map of USA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interstate Highways</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melding Po</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lady Justice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Landscape of Iowa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYSE</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriot</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mixed Economy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturn V</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>National Parks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneducated People/Rednecks</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Outrageous Police Behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Political Inflicting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcatraz</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Powdered Wigs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Sky</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottled milk</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire State Building</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rude Tourists Overseas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair and Equal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sense of Superiority</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBI Stamp</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The South</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Canyon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi War</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thomas Jefferson</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iwo Jima Monument</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>TV</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Uncle Ben</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive Branch</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>USDA Organic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet Rock</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>War</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky Mountains</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>World Peace</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seal of the United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>ZOG</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interpreting Students’ Hierarchy of Civil Religious Symbols

After the American flag, the next most important and recognized symbol of America for these students is clearly the eagle, a traditional symbol that amassed a very impressive 300 points. The next-ranking symbol, still well ahead of any other competitors, at 100 points, is the Statue of Liberty. These students grew up in a period of what is often called the Imperial Presidency, with the executive branch wielding great power, and the media focused on the power of the president far more than on those in the other branches of government. So one can understand why the image of the White House ranks third, at 61 points (figure 8).

![Figure 8. A composite of the highest-ranking non-flag symbols of the United States in this survey: eagle, State of Liberty, and the White House (along with the United States Marine Corps War Memorial), from the Wallpapers13 website. Source: http://www.wallpapers13.com/american-symbols-bald-eagle-statue-flag-star-white-house-soldier-plane-ribbon-firework-desktop-hd-wallpaper-for-pc-and-mobile-2560x1600](image)

Here is where an interesting pattern begins to emerge. I am of the Baby Boomer generation, and when I think of other symbols of America, many patriotic bits of imagery come to mind. Many of the symbols these students selected are not from the imagery used for generations by those spreading a culture of American patriotism but rather from some critiques of it. The number of such references, and their levels in the rankings, reinforce what the responses on Question Five suggested: these students are not as patriotic as generations past, many are openly critical of things America does in the world and how and why America does them, and that is reflected in the symbols they think of when they think of the United States. Before we get to Uncle Sam, who came in ninth on the list with 20 points, we have, in descending order, the dollar sign, the U.S. military, fatty foods, guns, and McDonalds; and fat people as a representation of the quintessence of America is just two points below Uncle Sam at 18 points. If we grouped fatty foods, McDonalds, and fat people together—I certainly think a case can be made for linking them conceptually—their combined score of 60 puts them with the White House, the third most salient symbol. Traditional symbols one might expect to find in such a survey—like the Liberty Bell, George Washington, or the Declaration of Independence are here, as a look at the list quickly affirms, but there are also several critical responses mentioning things like the national debt, drones, outrageous police behavior, and partisan politics. The last item on the list, ZOG, may be an abbreviation for Zionist Occupation Government; it was only a third choice on one ballot, but as a teacher, I must say I feel sad if even one student believes that anti-Semitic conspiracy theory version of American history.18
A recent set of polling by the Eurasia Group out of New York City found that while 65% of Americans aged 45–69 believe in American exceptionalism, among Americans aged 18–29 that number drops to 45%. The age range of the students surveyed here more closely aligns with that second group, and they show a similar lessening in the belief in American exceptionalism, as demonstrated by the range and consistency of symbols they listed. Indeed, one of the students thought of American exceptionalism when gazing on the flag, but interpreted it less benignly, as a “Sense of Superiority.”

Conclusion

The power of any given flag as a symbol is not a given; it can and will fluctuate in influence and usage over time. One of the important jobs of a vexillologist is to try to find meaningful ways to reach a better understanding of how this process works, while another job is to track such shifts and see what this knowledge might reveal to us. The use of a peer-reviewed survey, employing methodology approved and validated by other social scientists, to get at knowledge of flag history, of shifting opinions on appropriate usage, and the broader cultural phenomenon of civil religion, in which flags as national symbols often play a significant role (and in the case of the United States, the pre-eminent one), certainly offers an opportunity for us to gather new data and learn from it. These findings, for instance, suggest that patriotism is on the wane among young people in the United States, and they also reveal specific social and cultural forces in the society—the military and sports most prominent—which use the flag in ritual activity and do create a positive effect on increasing a sense of patriotic commitment. Such data should be useful not only to vexillologists, but to politicians, political scientists, and any American with growing concern about a weakening of shared sense of community in our society and the implications of that phenomenon. This approach can also be modified or replicated to do similar studies in other societies, and is just one of many, many ways vexillology can and should continue to enlarge its methods and models of inquiry.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the collaborative help of the following colleagues who helped administer the surveys in a controlled, professional manner: Professors Todd Ormsbee, Jason Wozniak, Thanayi Jackson, Valerie Lo, Shannon Rose Reilly, Joshua Brahinsky, and Linda Landau.

Special thanks go to a wonderful student assistant, Hung Nguyen, who helped me crunch the numbers. Also, transoceanic thanks to the Flag Society of Australia, who welcomed and supported the genesis of this project in its first phase more than 25 years ago.

Certain passages of summary here on methodology and earlier findings in 1988 were presented by the author in a related but different paper given at ICV 26 in Sydney that will be published in those proceedings by Flags Australia, whom he thanks for permission to include those elements here.

1 Over the many intervening years, after several moves, inevitable computer upgrades, and some unexpected natural disasters, my personal hard copy of that original NAVA 22 talk, which I never published, has been lost. I checked with the NAVA Historian, and a copy was not kept in the organizational archives. Whitney Smith always took a copy of everything I did for the Flag Research Center files, so eventually, once the holdings that have been moved to the Briscoe Center at the University of Texas are open for scholarly access, I can use that copy to flush out a deeper comparative analysis of student shifts in responses over a quarter century.


3 See Wybo Wiersma, “The Validity of Surveys: Online and Offline” (Oxford, England: Oxford Internet Institute, undated), 8, http://papers.wybowiersma.net/abstracts/Wiersma,Wybo,The_validity_of_surveys_online_and_offline.pdf. Similarly, I do not believe that, just because some survey of NAVA members several years ago suggested that those particular respondents found some flags more aesthetically pleasing than others, we as vexillologists have some special dispensation to tell people of other cultures or groups a “correct” way to make flags. As Whitney Smith pointed out many times, vexillology is about gathering information and analyzing it to learn more, ultimately, about the human experience—it is not about prescribing a practice of flag design that others are scolded or persuaded to follow.


8 Ibid. Overall, California has become increasingly diverse in the last thirty years and no longer has a white majority.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Ibid., 9.


16 If you are unfamiliar with this term, see all the listings under “‘Murica” at UrbanDictionary.com.


18 This conspiracy theory has strong historical ties to both antisemitic and white supremacist movements. See https://www.revolvey.com/main/index.php?s=Zionist%20Occupation%20Government%20conspiracy%20theory
Appendix: Flag Indentification and Response Survey

Following is a condensed version of the survey form for college students.

Your participation is politely requested. All data compiled will be kept confidential and results will be presented in the aggregate. Please do not consult electronic devices (phones, laptops, tablets, etc.) or ask others for input while doing the survey. Simply write down the answer with pen or pencil, and if you are not sure, make your best guess or just leave it blank and go on to the next. Work your way through the pages in order. You are not being graded on this in any way.

If you have any questions later, feel free to contact Prof. Scot Guenter in the Humanities Dept., San José State University (408-924-1366).

When you have completed the survey form, please return it immediately to the proctor. Thank you again for your participation in this research exercise.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION
1. Age __________
2. Gender _______
3. Year in School: ___ Freshman ___ Sophomore ___ Junior ___ Senior
4. Major:  ________________________________________________
5. U.S. citizen?  __ Yes  __ No  (If answer is No, then what country? _______ )
6. Racial/Ethnic Group you use for self identification (you may select more than one)
   __ White/Caucasian  __ African American __ Asian American __ Latino
   __ Native American ___ Other: _______________________________
7. Religious Affiliation (if any)  __________________________________
8. Political Affiliation (if any)  ___________________________________
9. Favorite TV show (if any)  ____________________________________
10. In a system of five levels of social class, where would you rank yourself?
    _____ upper class  _____ lower middle class
    _____ upper middle class  _____ lower class
    _____ middle middle class

PART TWO: FOCALIZATION AND EVOCATION
Write an answer to each question below.
1. Identify the flag pictured alone on the bottom of the previous page________
2. Think a minute and try to write down how and where you learned the information you used to answer question #1 above. Be as specific as possible.
3. Again, think about your answer to question #1. What sort of images and associations come to mind? Try honestly to list the “connection” your mind makes from that flag to what images, thoughts, or concerns follow as you free associate. List the images and thoughts that come to mind below. (If you include any specific names, please give a brief explanatory description.)

PART THREE: FLAG IDENTIFICATIONS
Please identify what each of these flags represents. If you do not know an answer, you may take your best guess or leave it blank and just go on to the next.

1. _________________________ 5. _________________________
2. _________________________ 6. _________________________
3. _________________________ 7. _________________________
4. _________________________ 8. _________________________
9. _________________________

PART FOUR: AMERICAN FLAG INFORMATION
Please respond to the following questions. If you do not know an answer, take your best guess or leave it blank.
1. According to the government, do the stripes on the American flag have a special significance?  ____ Yes     _____ No         If Yes, what is it?_____________
2. According to the government, do the stars on the American flag have a special significance?  _____ Yes     _____ No      If Yes, what is it?_____________
3. According to the government, do the colors on the American flag have a special significance?   _____ Yes     _____ No     If Yes, what is it for each?_______
4. Who designed the American flag? _______________________________
5. Have you ever felt a deep sense of pride when looking at the American flag?  _____ Yes     _____ No        If Yes, please give a specific instance or context that comes to mind. ______________________________________
6. Should there be a law against burning the American flag as a sign of protest?  _____ Yes     _____ No
7. Should children learn and recite the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary school?  _____ Yes     _____ No
8. Besides the American flag, what are the top three symbols that represent the United States of America that come to your mind? 1._____ 2._____ 3._____ 

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY. PLEASE RETURN IT TO THE PROCTOR.