Flags not only represent states or organizations, they can also identify a particular person in a position of importance. For example, royal banners and streamers, indicating the presence of a person of rank, have been used by many cultures and civilizations since antiquity. In the modern era, heads of state, military officers, and civil authorities such as mayors, governors, and ministers have used flags to indicate their rank and presence.

At the dawn of the 20th century the emerging Cuban republic implemented a rank flag for its president, calling it an “ensign” due to its naval character and function.

Establishing the Presidential Flag

In the short but intense history of the republic, the earliest mention of a flag used for the president was during the welcome reception for Cuba’s first president on his arrival in Havana on 10 May 1902. The military governor of Cuba, U.S. Army Brigadier General Leonard Wood, hosted the reception for Don Tomás Estrada Palma, the newly-elected president of the republic. General Wood ordered that the flag of Cuba be hoisted at the moment Estrada Palma’s ship was sighted in the port of Havana, and that it remain flying until the ship arrived at the pier.1

That flag had been displayed in November 1900 during the Constitutional Assembly at the Irijoa Theater (today in ruins but known as Teatro
Martí). It was also hoisted briefly at the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales in celebration of the formation of the Republic of Cuba. Interestingly, the flag was the property of General Wood, who kept it as a memento of the historic event.

![Figure 1. Cuba's national flag.](image)

At the end of the Spanish-American War, the sovereignty of Cuba changed from Spanish to American hands (under the Treaty of Paris, signed on 10 November 1898). Until 20 May 1902, only the U.S. flag was hoisted on official buildings, including the Palacio. Therefore, the point of departure for the search for a presidential flag of Cuba is the outstanding and extraordinary act of courtesy by General Wood.

Earlier in Cuba's history, the Cuban flag (created in 1849 at the inspiration of Narciso López), was briefly used as a presidential emblem. However, with the republic firmly established, it became necessary to establish presidential insignia in accordance with traditions inherited from Spain and customs observed in neighboring countries. On 3 July 1909 the Congress of the Republic authorized the president to organize the armed forces. By presidential decree, the national navy was established and its regulations were promulgated. Article 3621 (translated and abridged here) deals with the presidential flag.
It [the presidential flag] will be a squared flag of Turkish blue, with the national coat of arms at the center... At each of the corners of the angles of the square, a five-pointed white star will be placed... [The rest of the Article details the proportions and ratio of the stars and coat of arms in relation to the square.]²

In 19th-century Spanish, “Turkish blue” (azul turquí) meant the darkest of blue.³ This color had been introduced onto the republic’s flag and coat of arms three years earlier (on 6 January 1906), replacing the light blue (azul celeste) used before. Therefore the use of dark blue on the newly-created presidential ensign was consistent with the tri-chromatic Cuban symbolism of red, white, and dark blue in place since 1906.

![Figure 2. Presidential Flag as specified in Naval Regulations of 1929.](image)

As in many other Latin American republics, the number of stars was related to the military rank. Because the highest rank in Cuba during the war of independence was major general, with three stars, the flag of the president of the republic, as head of the navy, bore four stars. At this point it was not, technically, a presidential flag but a presidential ensign.
Its status was later confirmed by more regulations.

Presidential decree No. 147 of 3 March 1911 established Maritime Rules of Protocol and Etiquette, defining various items of importance for our study, in particular:

Article 55. Insignias [ensigns] are the following: The flag indicating the presence on board of the president of the republic, the flag of the chief of the national navy, the flag of the chief of the naval forces, and the streamer of the commander of the ship.

Article 57. These insignias signify direct command and as such can only be hoisted in the presence of the president of the republic as supreme chief of the naval and land forces; by the presence of the chief of the navy, as commander; by the chief of the naval forces, and by the commanders of the ships...In no event may more than one flag be hoisted at the same time on the same ship. The flag of higher rank will be the only one hoisted.4

The presidential ensign was only used by the national navy, which explains its limited usage and therefore why it is not well-known to the public. The use of a flag of rank by the navy may have been carried over from colonial times when the Captains General used an ensign as a sign of their rank and their presence on board their ships.

In March 1952 General Fulgencio Batista engineered a coup which deposed the elected constitutional government in Cuba. Apparently at some point between 1952 and 1956 the presidential ensign was modified by adding two stars to the flag. Three stars formed an arch above the coat of arms; three formed an inverted arch below. The stars represented the six provinces of Cuba.
The Presidential Flags of Cuba

An armed insurgency, after a struggle, came to power in 1959 under Fidel Castro. The new administration dissolved all the institutions of the previous regime—army personnel were furloughed and the rebel army assumed control of the country. In 1962 it reorganized the naval forces into the “revolutionary” navy and promulgated new rules and regulations. The presidential ensign was reserved for exclusive naval use, when the president of the republic is aboard a ship.

Some evidence indicates that later all the stars were removed from the presidential flag. However, as with the previous designs, the extreme secrecy which the Cuban government maintains over the regulations makes confirmation of any of the preceding information beyond the cited sources vexingly problematic.
Depicting the Presidential Flag

The earliest extant representation of Cuba’s presidential flag appears in Ottfried Neubecker’s masterful flag book for the German Imperial Navy, edited in 1926 (and updated in 1939). In that edition, the Cuban presidential ensign is shown with a field of light blue (instead of the dark blue of the 1909 regulation). While this might have been the result of a mistranslation of turquí as ‘turquoise’, Neubecker in fact based the image on a chart provided by the Cuban Embassy in Berlin, which showed the presidential ensign with a much lighter shade of blue than in the other flags illustrated. Perhaps someone in the Cuban government itself had misinterpreted the decree concerning the shade of blue of the presidential ensign.

![Figure 4. Presidential Flag as depicted with incorrect color in Das Grosse Flaggenbuch in 1939.](image-url)
That error apparently propagated to later publications and books on flags, likely with no one noticing.\textsuperscript{7} The original decree did not specify the shade of blue in modern chromatic terminology—at the time “\textit{azul turquí}” was sufficient. Furthermore, books on flags such as Neubecker’s and other similar works had very restricted circulation. And the limited use of the presidential ensign also made it virtually unknown.\textsuperscript{8}

![Presidential Flag as depicted by Services Hydrographique et Oceanographique de la Marine in 2000.](image)

Therefore, only in 2005, with a review of the rules and regulations of the presidential ensign and a comparison to foreign books and flag publications, did the error surface.

**Proposals**

This analysis leads to three proposals for the Cuban presidential ensign. The first would be to return to the original number of stars. The six stars used in the 1950s represented the political provincial divisions of the coun-
try at that time. But in 1972 most of the original six provinces were subdivided and the number of provinces increased to eleven. Returning to the original four stars would pay tribute to the republican past and affirm the rank and status originally intended for the flag.

The second would be to change the main device at the center of the flag. The current flag, charged with the national coat of arms, is cluttered with too many devices, hindering its aesthetics and recognizability. Reducing the charge to some of the republican elements of the coat of arms makes the flag simpler and more attractive.

The third would be to extend the usage of the flag beyond the navy to serve as the presidential flag and not just the presidential ensign. In this way, the flag could be hoisted at the presidential residence, the government house, and at any event or from any building when the president is present. The flag would become much more widely displayed and known.
Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief paper will be a source for future flag publications, encyclopedias, and books and manuals for official governmental purposes, to correct the mistake that has been perpetuated for decades. The blue of the current presidential ensign is of the same shade as the blue of Cuba’s national flag, jack, and other flags of rank.
End Notes


3. The term *azul turquí* was widely used in Argentina during the 1840s and 1850s to denote the shade of blue on the flag used by the Federal Party during the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas. It was also described as “the darkest of the blue”. Following the FIAV flag description code it should indicated as B++. It is defined as a very dark, intense, and deep blue in *Diccionario AKAL del Color*, Juan Carlos Sanz and Rosa Gallego, Ediciones AKAL, Madrid, Spain, 2001, p. 887ff.


7. An exception is the presidential ensign depicted in *National Geographic Magazine*, May 1949, p. 650 and February 1951, p. 223. The presidential ensign is described as a “flag” and with the same shade of blue as of the national flag and jack.

8. The French Navy’s flag guidebook, in its 2000 issue, assigns the same blue to the national flag, jack, navy rank flags, aircraft roundel, and coat of arms (Pantone: 280c – CMYK (%) C 100 – M 70 – Y 0 – K 10), while the blue of the presidential flag is described as “turquoise” (Pantone: 326c – CMYK (%) C 90 – M 0 – Y 40 – K 30). *Pavillons Nationaux et Marques Distinctives*, Services Hydrographique et Oceanographique de la Marine (S.H.O.M.), Brest, France, 2003.