

Everyone versus Each One

April 2020

By Ted Kaye

A discussion during the latest PFA meeting crystallized a concept I'd been mulling over for some time: flags should represent **everyone** in a place rather than **each one** (*group*) there.

The 1964 debate over a new flag for Canada struggled over how to represent Canadians of British **and** of French descent (among others). Many proposals attempted to represent both groups with symbols such as the Union Jack and the *fleur-de-lis*.



But the genius the Maple Leaf Flag lies in how it represents



everyone in Canada rather than **each** component group.

When designers represent multiple groups on a flag, it usually results in an overly-complex design.

For example, Montreal's flag had symbols representing the English, Scots, Irish, and French, then a

2018 update added a symbol for the native peoples—something for **each**.



Australia has a similar problem. In an interview I gave on Melbourne radio in 2015, I commented on how the country now flies **three** flags officially: the national flag, the Aboriginal flag, and the Torres Strait Islanders flag (Australian schools, councils, and cultural institutions typically show these flags in front of their buildings).

Australians, with the best of intentions, use three flags to represent their country's inhabitants.

Instead of one flag for **each** group, I asserted that Australia needed one flag representing **everyone**.



If flag designers would emulate Canada and sought a flag to represent **everyone** rather than **each one**, the result would be simpler, less cluttered flags.

The Flag Need Not Be Everything

October 2023

By Ted Kaye

In city and state flag-design efforts, we often see well-meaning but off-the-mark demands that the new flag constitute some sort of repository for the community's entire history, values, geography, and population groups.

One recent initiative sought a design that "adequately summarizes the history and geography of all peoples who have resided in or contributed to the development of this community".

I challenge this. ***The fundamental purpose of a flag is signaling at a distance.*** Its design needs to be discernible (viewers can make it out) and memorable (viewers can recall what it represents). That's all. Other uses are secondary.

To ask a flag to do much more is far beyond the capability of any design. All the flag needs to do is have symbolism (objects, colors, layout) that links somehow to the place, and avoids singling out any one group or offending people.

I describe this issue as "trying too hard", which leads to overly-complex designs with too many elements.

Yes, there should be connections between the flag's symbolism and the community it represents—that's what the "Meaningful Symbolism" principle in *Good Flag, Bad Flag* means, but its purpose is to achieve memorability, not to create an all-encompassing quilt.

Take Canada's iconic flag, for instance. The country has many more types of trees than maples, but it has chosen a maple leaf and educated the world that the symbol represents Canada. The maple leaf is discernible and memorable.

Alaska is much more than a constellation in the north sky, but using that symbol evokes the state in a unique and effective way.

So I suggest instead that such efforts simply seek a flag which "distinctively represents the community"—otherwise the stage is set for too-complex designs.

A Theory of City SOB Flags

December 2017

By Ted Kaye

We're tracking over 100 city flag re-design efforts on the PFA website, and I've been involved in many of them personally.

When describing these in presentations at the recent ICV in London and the NAVA meeting in Boston, I've received insights from fellow vexillologists.

For me, the most interesting insight involves a confusion about just what a city flag represents.

It appears that in many cases, a city's leaders confuse a) representing the *city government* with a flag and b) representing the *city as a whole* with a flag. That is, does the flag represent the city's government—mayor, council, bureaus, employees, OR does it represent the entire city—all of its residents, its institutions, its territory? This is similar to a country's distinction between a state flag and a civil flag.

This confusion may help explain the predominance of city seals—the ultimate symbol of the city government—on city flags.

Here's another example of that confusion. Portland has been known as “The City of Roses” for

more than a century. The “city” represented by that motto is the entire city, not just its government. However, in the past few years, city government vehicles have changed to sport a new motto: “Portland—the City that Works”. Now, that's not a commentary on the industriousness of Portlanders. It's a promotion of the dedication of city government employees.

Cities that believe the flag represents the city government may be more likely to adopt an SOB—a “seal on a bedsheet”, using the city government's symbol, the seal, rather than a simpler and more compelling design. Thoughts, readers?



Government vs. People's Flags

August 2023

By Ted Kaye

I believe a primary reason that so many cities and states place seals, arms, or seal-like charges on their flags is that in the United States we have scant tradition of differentiating between civil, government, and military use (and between land and sea use).

In many other countries, these uses can result in up to six major classifications: Civil Flag, State Flag, War Flag, Civil Ensign, State Ensign, War Ensign—with different designs for each—and up to 64 combinations of those uses.

In fact, to describe these distinctions with a symbolic shorthand, in the early 1970s FIAV adopted Whitney Smith's 2x3-grid convention as the standard when describing flag usage (fotw.info/flags/vxt-fis.html#fiavcode).

But in the U.S., we tend to use just one design for all six uses. In fact, the coding for our national flag looks like this:



I discussed my earlier thinking on this subject in “A Theory of City SOB Flags” (VT #67, Dec. 2017).

All those seal-on-bedsheet designs may well have been adopted by governments thinking that the resulting flag were “state flags”, representing the government—as indeed they were. But in the U.S. the flags also have to do double-duty as “civil flags”—representing the people, and in that sense they fail. Very few cities or states have separate flags for these uses.

We argue that a seal doesn't belong on a flag because of design considerations (difficult to see at a distance, not reversible, more expensive to manufacture). But another strong argument against a seal is that it represents the *government* rather than the *people*.

Contrast non-governmental flag display in Chicago (widespread) with Los Angeles (rarely seen). Why would an individual fly a government flag? I believe people want flags that represent them, not the government of their place.

The Flag IS the Logo

December 2020

By Ted Kaye

Many a corporation will create a flag by placing its logo on a solid field. That's OK, as the logo is the primary graphic symbol of the entity. Yet we frown when cities, counties, and provinces place their logos on their flags (the late Peter Orenski called this *logorrhea*). Why? Beyond the design challenge, I believe there's a more fundamental reason to avoid this practice.

Consider a country. What is its logo? I assert that it is the flag. As the primary, iconic, graphic symbol of a country, the flag serves the same purpose as does a logo for a corporation.

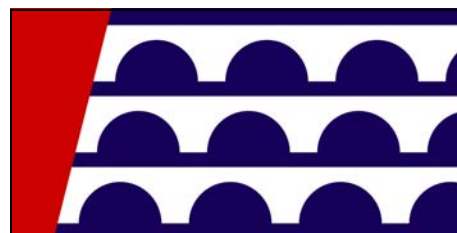
However, many city governments, with their modern branding efforts, will develop a logo and then slap it on a flag (sometimes replacing a better design). This reflects the confusion over what the flag represents—the city government or the entire city (see “A Theory of SOB Flags” for a fuller explication—I believe that confusion is also what leads cities to use another government symbol, the seal, on their flags).

But even more important, I assert that a flag IS a logo. Therefore placing a city logo on a flag reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of a flag. (While there may be historical, cultural, or practical reasons to put one flag on another, the concept of a flag image centered on a solid field to create another flag seems ludicrous—yet cities and counties will blithely do so with a logo.)

The symbol of a city should be its flag, because THAT serves as its logo (it should not be a flag with a logo on it). Please join me in spreading this message to cities that need to hear it!



Des Moines, Iowa (2008–2019).



Des Moines, Iowa (1974–2008, 2019–).

The Mere-Exposure Effect

February 2016

By Ted Kaye

The **mere-exposure effect** is a psychological phenomenon by which people tend to develop a preference for things merely because they are familiar with them. In social psychology, this effect is sometimes called the “familiarity principle”.

I recently learned of this term, and the concept which it describes. It puts a name to a challenge faced by anyone trying to update or change an established flag design.

As the “year of the flag” turns into a new year, with flag redesign efforts multiplying at the city and state level across the U.S., it's heartening to have a well-researched descriptive theory to explain why people can be so resistant to flag change.

The effect has been demonstrated with many kinds of things, including words, Chinese characters, paintings, pictures of faces, geometric figures, and sounds—so it is not surprising that it would apply to flags as well.

In my explanation of the Oregon flag redesign project of 2008–09, I described people's preference for a flag, no matter how poorly designed, as the “ugly baby phenomenon”—using the analogy that every mother loves her baby, no matter how ugly, because she is accustomed to it and it is her very own.

Such a comfortable and proprietary relationship can cloud aesthetic judgment. Citizens of a city or state (or even a country) can feel the same way about their flags. But unlike mothers, cities, states, and countries can change their flags.

As Fiji restarts its flag redesign effort (the second round of public submissions is due by 29 February), and New Zealand approaches the culmination of its own process (the public referendum on the proposed new flag versus the current flag ends 24 March), the **mere-exposure effect** may well help explain the reaction of the public to these initiatives.

[thanks to Wikipedia for the description of this concept.]

The “Essential Flag”

August 2018

By Ted Kaye

I’ve recently noted a profound philosophical difference among vexillologists about what is the “essential flag” to study.

One camp holds that it is the real, physical flag (museum folks, some historians, and collectors gravitate to that side) and any representation of it is merely theoretical.

The other camp holds that it is the flag’s design as specified and adopted (scholars, designers, and analytical types gravitate to that other side) and that is the true essence—physical flags being only representations or approximations (and frequently flawed).

Many vexillologists will say “of course, it’s both”, but their actions and the emphasis of their analyses will usually reveal a strong bias toward one of the camps.

Heraldry appears to have a definite position on this issue. My understanding is that the “official” coat of arms is the “blazon” (the words that describe the arms), and that any depiction which follows those

words is acceptable. Thus most heraldic work focuses primarily on those blazons, and refers to actual representations in order to understand/interpret those blazons. That is, heraldry is firmly in the “as specified and adopted” camp.

I’ve heard arguments for both sides articulated as recently as ICV27. I think this would be fascinating to explore this further and look forward to readers’ comments.

Which of these is
the “essential” PFA flag?



The PFA flag, as manufactured by
TME Co. in 2010.



The PFA flag, as illustrated based on
the 2010 official specifications.