The Flag's A Religion by Wilbur Zelinsky
from: The Washington Post 30 June 1985

Nationalism is the reigning passion of our times, and an extroverted American Republic has been more willing to show its colors than any other nation in the world. Even the most casual look at the landscape reveals how conspicuous and pervasive a role the Stars and Stripes plays. Our national flag inevitably adorns every federal, state, county and municipal facility, museums, schools, monuments and most office buildings, hospitals, cemeteries, apartment buildings and churches.

Surprisingly few factory or warehouse structures lack flags. A high percentage of service stations and fast-food establishments display them. Automobile dealers seem to be in competition for who can fly the largest one.

The flag appears on trucks and automobiles, farm silos, advertising signs and billboards, clothing and many a manly tattoo. Perhaps most revealing of underlying attitudes is the large number of private residences equipped with obviously costly flagpoles. In brief, the flag is ubiquitous.

Ironically, this increase in the cult of the flag comes at the same time that the observance of national holidays has become perfunctory at best. During the infancy of the Republic, July 4 and Washington's Birthday were great popular festivals, the occasions for wild rejoicing and national glorification. Today these occasions pass unnoticed by many Americans. Their deepest meaning for most of us is as an extended weekend.

For that matter, the United States used to support an industry for the creation of patriotic paintings, monuments, sculptures, verse, fiction and music. That is no longer true.

What does this apparent schizophrenia tell us about American nationalism? Do we have any ideals left that the flag represents? And if not, why not?

Clearly, citizens confer upon the flag a bountiful fund of affection and awe and celebrate it in song, story and ritual. No less an arbiter of American values than Time magazine asserted in its 1976 bicentennial cover story that "for many Americans the flag is literally a sacred object — a symbol so charged with emotion that people cannot look at and judge, even, whether or not the design is esthetically good or bad. . . . We were the first people to declare an annual Flag Day. Our children pledge allegiance to the flag. . . . Unquestioning loyalty to the flag has been considered a fundamental American principle."

Among some segments of the population flag fetishism has gone well beyond the threshold of hysteria. It may not be too extreme to argue that, as the organizing symbol of our nation-state and of the Americanism that may be its civil religion, the flag has preempted the place, visually and otherwise, of the crucifix in older Christian lands.

The flag and the red-white-and-blue color combination are so omnipresent in America that perceptual saturation may have set in. As I can attest from field experience, you need much concentration to see the full extent of their presence; but if you take the trouble, the degree to which our visual scene is punctuated by these symbols is truly mind-boggling.

The frequency with which the tri-color combination shows up is especially astonishing. I have found nothing like it in my travels through Canada, Mexico, Central America, Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland and Turkey.

What makes this so curious is that the historical career of the American flag has been radically different both quantitatively and qualitatively from that of other nationalistic items in American landscape and behavior. In the early decades of the Republic, the national flag was remarkably unimportant to the citizenry at large. It was far less popular than the eagle, Miss Liberty or the figure of George Washington. Surprisingly, it was many decades before its design and dimensions were standardized.

The largest collection of songs and ballads of the revolutionary period fails to include any reference to the flag even in its earliest versions. An analysis of some 2,500 Fourth of July orations delivered between 1776 and 1876 notes that the flag was seldom mentioned before 1845 and the Mexican War. As of 1794, the "Stars and Stripes had never been carried by our army, nor would it be for another generation to come," writes Milo M. Quaife. "We had no Navy to display if abroad, and while it floated over some merchant ships and over land fortifications, the vast majority of Americans never came in contact with a fort or with a ship at sea."

If the ascendency of the flag began in earnest with the Mexican conflict (and perhaps also with the growing popularity of Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" after the War of 1812), "the start of the Civil War encouraged for the first time on a wide scale the display of the national flag," writes flag authority Whitney Smith.

"The cult of the national flag, as it has endured to this day was a direct outcome of the Great Rebellion. . . . In Boston two weeks after the attack on Fort Sumter, [an orator] spoke of the flag, always honored, always beloved [but now] worshiped.' The word was by no means too strong. And what had been a stern and solemn enthusiasm in wartime became a joyous delirium at war's conclusion. As one writer asserted: 'After the fall of Sumter [to federal troops] Cincinnati was fairly iridescent with red, white and blue.' Cincinnati was but typical of all cities, towns and villages over the length and breadth of the land."
The process of nation-state formation is least awkward (but perhaps most difficult to observe) when nation and state have originated and ripened almost simultaneously and have hybridized in doing so. We can see likely examples of this in the cases of France, England, Sweden, Japan and perhaps Australia. The thesis I wish to propose is that the genesis of a self-aware American nation preceded the origin of a sovereign state in 1776; that for the next several decades the concept of nation was more powerful than that of state; that thus the two processes — nation-formation and state-formation — were out of phase; and that fact explains the contradictory trends in expressing our patriotic emotions.

The historical evidence that American nation-formation and state-formation have been out of step is abundant. Indeed it is something of a miracle that a unified American state appeared at all, because the Union was formed by scraps of states that had been states before.

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Notes from
Grace Rogers Cooper
NAVA President

The publication of the Flag Trivia quiz by Howard Michael Madus in the July/August issue of NAVA News raised a question in my mind: Is this appropriate for NAVA News?

The quiz could have been very informative if an explanation had accompanied each answer.

According to our Bylaws, we are an "association... whose purpose shall be the promotion of vexillology as the scientific study of flags." I was not a member when the Bylaws were written, but I believe the meaning intended was "systematic and exact," the third meaning given by Webster in the New World Dictionary.

Mr. Madus' questions are provocative and that can be good if we can learn from the exchange. Let's use this as an opportunity to exchange information.

Question 1, answer 1, the thirteen star flag was in use until 1916 by the Navy as a small boat ensign; it was changed by the second Flag Act from thirteen stars to fifteen, which became effective in 1795, ref. Thirteen Star Flags: Keys to Identification, G. Cooper, 1973.

I wish someone else would discuss Question 2. I don't know which particular flag Mr. Madus means by U.S. Flag as no date or design is given, and I'm not sure I could answer it if I did. Can you?

In Question three, Madus quotes the word official, but there is no indication as to whom or what he is quoting. The use of quotes seems to be the point as he refers to it in his answer. I would like to know the source of this answer.

What are your feelings about the other nine questions and answers?

We are familiar with Mr. Madus' research and we know he has done excellent work. I would like to encourage him to join NAVA and to write short essays on specific points of flag research with citations to answer debatable points raised. In this way he can share the information he has collected and we can gain...or...maybe...we can share information we have. We all have much to learn.

If you have any documented information that pertains to the Flag Trivia quiz, please send it for publication in the NAVA News. We hear romantic stories about flags bantied about in everyday life, but hopefully NAVA is an organization interested in the systematic and exact study of flags.

What do you think?

In compiling the July-August issue of NAVA News, I inadvertently left out the source of the United States Flag Trivia quiz by Mr. Madus.

It appeared in the Spring 1985 issue of LORE, the official quarterly magazine of the Milwaukee Public Museum and was submitted by Dr. Whitney Smith.

Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!

The Editor

Information on Flag Sought

The above is a drawing of one of the flags in the Liberty Memorial Museum that those attending NAVA XIX will visit in October. No one has been able to give the curator any details. All the information available is in a letter on file from major General Harry A. Smith, U.S. Army, dated the 16th of September 1927, from Fort Omaha, Nebraska:

This flag flew over the office of the Regierungs Präsident at Treves, Germany, when the American troops entered on the morning of December 1, 1918. It was hauled down by the Germans just as the troops approached the building. This building, a fine 3-story cut stone edifice, was taken as General Pershing's advance headquarters. The flag was turned over to me when we took over the building on December 2, 1918. I was at the time the officer in charge of civil affairs in the occupied territory of Germany.

Maybe someone out there in NAVA-land can identify this flag. The initials TR is emblazoned on the eagle's breast.

Woody Ridgway
9133 Grant Lane
Overland Park, Kansas 66212

VEXILLOLOGICAL CARTOON

from: The Boston Globe
8 April 1985
Introducing . . .
The Flag of Arlington County, Virginia

Description: "A traditional "Great Seal" style of flag made less formal by a cheerful pale yellow field and a wreath of native dogwood blossoms surrounding Arlington House, the County's most familiar landmark and the source of its name." The seal is blue and white; the dogwood blossoms (state flower) are their natural colors although the leaves are blue due to a contest restriction that only one other color be introduced in the design other than the official County colors of blue and white. (The other color in this instance was the pale yellow field.) Official dimensions: 3'x5'.

Designer: Mr. Harvey J. Wilcox, Deputy General Counsel, Department of the Navy

Background: Prior to the adoption of the above flag in 1983, Arlington County residents, myself included, were under the impression that the blue and white Arlington House emblem (shown below) was the official seal, although the County Board in March of 1983 in order for a flag and a seal to be created at one time. Of 110 entries submitted, Mr. Wilcox's design was chosen.

Submitted By: Thomas J, Carrier, Arlington County, Virginia.

Continued from page 2
masses through brute power alone. The state can now realize its mission most effectively if it monopolizes the deepest feelings of its population — if it is regarded as the ultimate repository of social values.

Such an ideal communication between state and citizen comes to pass most readily if the state is able to identify and intertwine itself with a single preexisting nation or, when necessary, with the nation it has become obliged to create.

The general conclusion we can draw from observing the national flag in the American landscape, past and present, is that it seems to provide strong visual evidence of increasing spiritual as well as administrative domination by the central state. Most particularly, it demonstrates the voluntary participation by the general citizenry in our latter-day statehood.

Such celebration of statefulness stands in sharp contrast to the fading away or emasculation of the outward signs of the antecedent faith. These include the axioms and aspirations that had bound together the early, relatively stateless, American nation. Among the most revolutionary of these was that the state is created of, by and for the people and exists only to advance their well-being — never the reverse.
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TENTATIVE SCHEDULE FOR NAVA 19
Excitement Schedule - Kansas City

FRIDAY 11 October 1985
4:00 pm Registration
6:30 pm Reception . Refurbishing Old
Friendships . Greeting New
Members and Guests
7:30 pm Opening Ceremony . New
Exciting
8:00 pm Executive Board Meeting .
Browse through the Exhibits .
Visit Ramada's J.T.'s Lounge

SATURDAY 12 October 1985
7:45 am Rise & Shine Continental
Breakfast
8:30 am Annual NAVA Business Meeting
10:00 am Refreshment Break
10:15 am Presentation of Research Papers
11:30 am Lite Luncheon
12:30 pm Group Pictures
12:34 pm Kansas City Hi-Lites Bus Tour
6:30 pm Western Barbecue (Outdoors -
casual wear should include
jacket or sweater.

SUNDAY 13 October 1985
8:00 am Continental Breakfast
9:00 am Presentation of Research Papers
10:30 am Refreshment Break
12:00 pm Lunch Break (Try Capt. Jeremiah
Tuttles Restaurant - delicious!
Executive Board Meeting
1:00 pm Presentation of Research Papers
2:30 pm Don't you dare miss the Colorful
Closing Ceremony and the
Presentation of the Driver Award

THIS SCHEDULE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE!
PRESENTATIONS (as of September 1985)

1. WHITNEY SMITH - "THE BANNERS OF ACHEH"

2. SCOT M. GUENTER - "THIS FLAG HAS FLOWN OVER THE U.S. CAPITOL"

3. ROBERT COYKENDALL - "THE NAVY FLAG"

4. GEORGE CAHILL FOR ROBERT MORRIS - "ASTUTE VEXILLOLOGIST SAVES BETSY ROSS SIGNATURE FOR PHILADELPHIA"

5. HENRY UNTERMAYER - "THE NEW FLAG OF THE CITY OF PALM SPRINGS"

6. BOB WEATON - "THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER"

7. JOHN PURCELL - "REPORT OF ICV-XI MADRID"

8. DEVIN HARRINGTON - "FORT WHOOP-UP FLAG"

9. FLORENCE HUTCHISON - "BETSY ROSS"

* THE ABOVE LIST OF PRESENTATIONS IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE!