THE GREAT FLAG CONTROVERSIES

As Texans raise their flags for 1986, questions are beginning to arise over just which flags they should be unfurling. Certainly no other state can claim as many flags in their history as we can, but the very number we have to consider can cause problems.

Perhaps the most controversial question is, Which is the real Alamo flag? There are at least two possibilities. One school of thought holds with the flag of the New Orleans Greys. This is the blue silk banner which now rests in the National Museum in Mexico City.

The New Orleans Greys flag was made in 1835 by a group of women from Nacogdoches. Several Texans went to New Orleans on a recruiting trip and returned to Nacogdoches with more than one hundred men. In their new grey uniforms, the men were promptly dubbed the "New Orleans Greys" and given the flag, made by the women, to welcome the volunteers to the Texas Revolutionary Army.

After receiving the flag, the New Orleans Greys marched to San Antonio in time to help defeat the Mexican army at the siege of Bexar in December of 1835. While most of the Greys then proceeded to join the ill-fated Matamoros expedition or were massacred at Goliad, their blue flag remained in San Antonio. It could have been the flag flying over the Alamo on March 6, 1836, when it was said that the victorious Mexican soldiers tore it down and sent it back to Mexico City in triumph.

Another school of thought upholds the theory that the Flag of 1824 was the banner which flew over the Alamo during the battle. Perhaps the most prevalent flag of the era, this one was a variation of the Mexican flag. The Texans took the green, white, and red banner and replaced the central eagle insignia with the date 1824.

It was intended to be a strong reminder to the Mexican government that the Texans would honor Mexican rule only if Mexico would honor the Mexican Constitution of 1824, which outlined their colonial rights. In fact, the men at the Alamo were fighting to protect those constitutional rights, never knowing that Texas had declared its independence from Mexico four days earlier.

Terry Nicholson of the Gallery of the Republic says that they have received so many questions about the Alamo flag that the Gallery has decided to reproduce both in their series of historic flag reproductions. We'll probably never know for certain which flag flew over the Alamo on March 6, 1836.

Other flags over Texas open to question are those of the French and Spanish. The French flag usually shown in Texas flag displays is white with 22 gold or yellow fleurs-de-lis. Occasionally, however, a deep blue banner with three gold fleurs-de-lis is used. Mamie Wynne Cox in her book Romantic Flags of Texas states that the blue flag was already out-of-date when La Salle laid claim to Texas.

Most likely, La Salle flew the white banner, but he could have flown any number of colorful flags which belonged to his king, Louis XIV, including one similar to the white one but with a blue shield of the king in the center.

The Spanish flag also has been presented in two ways, sometimes solid red background and other times quartered in red and white. Both flags show the same symbols in each quadrant—the gold lions of the Kingdom of Leon and the gold and white castles of the Kingdom of Castile, united to form the country of Spain. This flag was in use throughout the age of New World exploration, but there is no official date on when and where and by whom the first Spanish flag was flown over Texas.

Most sources consider the red and white background to be the correct Spanish flag. Actually, the banner of the Spaniards in Texas could have been the silver flag of Charles II, King of Spain in the late 1600s.

One group of flags which has been long overlooked in surveying flags of Texas is the banner of the Native Americans. These first Americans did use flags and were carrying them when first encountered by the Europeans. These flags were usually red, colored from native plant dyes, and made of deer or buffalo hide. Some were solid colored and others were painted with symbols, such as a sun and its rays.

Perhaps it is time we added another to our list of Texas flags—the banner of the Native American Indian.

The one constant in any study of the history of flags is the fact that man seems always to have wanted to raise a visible symbol of the things which were important to him. Soldiers and explorers didn’t always bother to keep their flags technically correct, which—while a bane to historians—keeps the study of history alive and well for the curious.

from: National Dispatch
The Newspaper of the Texas Sesquicentennial Commission
Volume 4, Number 4
Austin, Texas

New Orleans Greys Banner

1824
Flag of 1824

La Salle's Flag

artist's conception of a native american indian banner

Spanish flag in Texas

naval news

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Banner Years for the Aussies

by Jack Lowenstein

SYDNEY — Most Australians want to rally around the flag. The question is: What flag? Even those desperate for a new one can't agree on what it should look like — entries in a nearly $62,000 competition for a new design feature everything from a boomerang to an emu with its head in the sand. The current ensign, a southern Cross on a blue background with a Union Jack in the left corner, first flew in 1902. This flag, itself the winner of a competition is a variation on the template used for dozens of colonies, dominions and dependencies in the halcyon days when the sun never set on the British empire. Now, apart from the shrinking dependencies now on the British empire. Now, apart from the shrinking dependencies, only three nations in the Commonwealth cling to the ancient form: New Zealand, Fiji and Australia.

A few other places, including South Africa and the U.S. state of Hawaii, also incorporate the Union Jack. But for many Australians, only the total extirpation of the device will do to mark the final break with a colonial — and convict — past. It's not just national pride, though. There's convenience as well, some claim. In Canada recently, Australian Premier Bob Hawke had to confess to his hosts for flying the nearly indistinguishable New Zealand flag, with four red stars on a blue background, instead of Australia's, which sports six white stars.

Sailing for Australia in an international competition, millionaire wine merchant Sir James Hardy was accosted by an Englishman wanting to know what British yacht club his flag was from. Stung, Sir James joined Ausflag 88, an organization pledged to find a new national flag before the 1988 bicentennial, which will commemorate 200 years of white settlement here.

Not everyone, however, agrees with Sir James, especially those who fought under the present standard. When Sir James began campaigning for a new one, Australia's veterans' association, the Returned Services League, looked for a new wine supplier.

To Sir Colin Hines, RSL president in New South Wales, threats to the flag are just creeping republicanism.

Prof. Manning Clark, probably Australia's greatest historian, and a judge in the Ausflag competition, feels the current flag is an anachronism. But the greatest obstacle to getting rid of it is choosing a replacement, he admits. Many Australians still won't recognize "Advance Australia Fair," which replaced "God Save the Queen" as the national anthem in the last bout of decolonization fever here in the 1970s. Many prefer the irreverent "Waltzing Matilda" to either. It was to avoid a similar wrangle that Ausflag organized its competition, with a prize of about $3,500 every month for six months, and $40,600 for the final winner.

But still there are problems: "The entries so far have been awful; 90% show no originality whatsoever," lamented the judges in their first official report.

Deciding the competition's winner will be far from the end of the matter in any case. Next Australia will have a national referendum offering a clear choice between its contender and the current flag. But there are considerable doubts that the Labor government would risk possible unpopularity in calling one. Even if it agrees to a referendum at the next general election there may be a snag. Ausflag wants the new flag to be ready for the beginning of the bicentennial celebrations; Mr. Hawke is expected to delay elections until the bicentennial euphoria is in full flood.

Mr. Lowenstein is a free-lance journalist living in Australia.

from: The Wall Street Journal

THE AUSTRALIAN Monday, August 19, 1985

Letter To The Editor

Dr. Rev. Szala;

I have just returned from a trip to Australia. While there I picked up some references to flags in the newspapers, which I enclose.

There is currently considerable controversy over the "Ausflag '88" proposal to replace Australia's current national flag with a new design in 1988, Australia's bicentennial year. The controversy seems to be less over the flag itself than the question of whether an honest effort is being made to determine whether the majority of the public want a new flag, or whether the new-flag movement is determined to get rid of the current flag despite what the public really wants. I unfortunately arrived in Australia too late to get the newspapers which discussed the issue itself, but here are some letter-to-the-editor comments on it.

Sincerely,
Frederick Patten

Irksome

What irks me most about the Ausflag '88 competition is the mercenary approach to a highly emotive national issue.

Of course people send in new flag designs if there are a few thousand dollars to be won! Hence they are not expressing any patriotism but only lust for money. Who are you trying to kid, Mr. Scruby?

Lucie Baragwanath
Box Hill North, Vic

Like a drunk

With due respect, your survey on the flag design does not show as you claim that "the vast majority of Australians are happy with the national flag the way it is ... and want to keep it."

It does suggest, however, that of those who responded to the survey 77 per cent wanted to retain the present flag design. The responses may have come from all parts of Australia, but there exists no valid indication that they were truly representative of all Australians in the sample.

The sample was confined only to those who had access to the survey edition of The Australian and those who enjoyed the convenience of returning the coupon.

As one of the famous statisticians has reminded us all, one can always use statistics like a drunk uses a lamp post: for support rather than illumination.

B.A. Ung
Lower Templestowe, Vic

Going . . . going . . .

It is time this pathetic push for a new national flag be exposed for the deceitful exercise it is: one of many attempts by ill-informed radical leftists to further erode what is left of Australia's heritage.

Kingsley Sutton
Hampton, Vic

I am looking forward to the day when Australia becomes a republic. The first step is to get rid of that obnoxious Union Jack from the corner of our flag.

Lindsay Harper
Redland Bay, Qld.

Your flag survey was successful. Now for the Constitution.

Noel Mundy
Launceston, Tas

Flag hogwash

Being a third generation Aussie I would like to have my 33 cents worth and reply to all the hogwash that is being written, like being unpatriotic, etc, in the removal of the Union Jack from our new flag. I want to say 1 am very patriotic and am looking forward to our new Australian flag, and do not care whether it is black, white or brindle, as long as it is 100 Australian and not 25 per cent somebody else's.

L. Lane
Southport, Qld
WASHINGTON — Caldwell Titcomb, a professor of music at Brandeis University, is promoting a smashing good idea. He wants to dump “The Star-Spangled Banner” as our national anthem and to replace it with “America the Beautiful.” Let us hear three cheers and a tiger for Titcomb!

Writing in The New Republic, the professor makes a convincing case.

Item one: Our national anthem isn’t as hallowed as people think it is. Contrary to popular belief, “The Star-Spangled Banner” has been the nation’s official song only since 1931.

Item two: Our anthem isn’t even our own. The music was written by an Englishman, John Stafford Smith, as a drinking song for London’s Anacreon Society. How members managed to sing it, unless they were roaring drunk, is a mystery, for that brings us to ...

Item three: The song is unsingable. Yes, the sopranos of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir can make it. A tenor from the Metropolitan Opera can get to the rocket’s red glare, but 99 percent of the American public, trying to reach the land of the free, will collapse along the way.

Look at the music: If you try the Banner in C, the range is from middle C on the south side to the G 12 notes to the north. If you try it in two flats, you go down to B-flat and up to an unreachable F. By contrast “America the Beautiful” ranges only from the D above middle C to the fruited plain on the E that is little more than an octave away. Moreover, “America the Beautiful” is a homegrown product — music by Samuel Ward, lyrics by Katherine Lee Bates.

Item four: If you think the Banner’s music is awful, look at the words. All the words. As it is commonly sung, with only the first verse, “The Star-Spangled Banner” is the world’s only national anthem that ends with a question: Does the banner still wave? In the succeeding verses — the verses that are almost never sung — the question is answered affirmatively, but it is answered in verse that would make a teacher of English weep.

The lyrics were inspired, you will recall, when Francis Scott Key watched the British bombardment of Fort McHenry, Md., in 1814. Key was a lawyer by trade, and he wrote as many lawyers write: poorly. In his second verse, the British fleet becomes “the foe’s haughty host.” The U.S. flag is flying above “the towering steep.” Key thought internal rhymes were nifty: “Now it catches the gleam of the morning’s first beam.” The third verse is worse than the second. Here the British are reviled as hirelings and slaves whose blood has washed out “their foul footsteps’ pollution.” Sing that to Maggie Thatcher! Stanza four gives us the poetically unforgivable: “Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just.” Aargh!

I digress long enough to say that most sovereign anthems are pretty dreadful. England’s “God Save the Queen” has a certain majesty. The Confederate States of America had a rouser in “Dixie Land.” But the French “Marseillaise” is a toughie for amateurs. Among our own sovereign states, we have some good ones in Indiana’s banks of the Wabash and Kentucky’s old Kentucky home, but except where the states have appropriated a professional’s music (“Georgia on My Mind” and “Oklahoma!”), the anthems do not inspire. Who could whistle the North Dakota hymn?

As Professor Titcomb notes, “America the Beautiful” has been urged as a better choice from time to time in the past. In a poll conducted by the Boston Globe in 1977, it wiped out the Banner by better than 2-to-1. The National Federation of Music Clubs long ago took a strong stand in its favor. In candor, it has to be said that the second and third stanzas of “America the Beautiful” are no great shakes as poetry either, but they’re not as yeasty as the unsung stanzas of the Banner.

Rep. Andy Jacobs of Indiana has introduced a bill, H.R. 1052, that would replace the Banner with the Beautiful. He is letting his bill lie germinating under the winter snows, but come next spring he plans to give it a good push. Every ballpark basso who has reached for the high C in “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and fumbled the note disgracefully, will wish the congressman well.

(James Kilpatrick is a syndicated columnist.)
By BILL KELLER
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, Jan. 13 — State Department officials are disinclined to boast about it, and in some quarters are even disavowing any part in it, but last Tuesday an American operative, unimpeded by diplomatic protocol and legal precedent, took decisive action.

On that day, while most of the Government was preoccupied with hand-wringing over how to deal with Libya, a State Department custodian removed the flag of Afghanistan from the diplomatic foyer of the State Department. Witnesses were slightly giddy at the boldness of the act.

"For once, we just took action," said one participant in the episode, "It was the most satisfying moment I've had at the State Department."

The unwitting instigator of this affair was the Afghan chargé d'affaires, Rohulla Erfaqui, who works in a peculiar political limbo. The United States does not acknowledge his Soviet-backed Government and, in fact, gives covert support to guerrillas who are trying to overthrow it. But the United States does maintain an embassy in Kabul as a listening post. And lukewarm diplomatic relations are conducted here between Mr. Erfaqui and the State Department Office of Protocol.

One recent day, according to American officials, Mr. Erfaqui was passing the row of flag standards inside the diplomats' entry to the State Department and noticed that the pole marked "Afghanistan" was flying the flag of the Communist regime his government had overthrown. Politely, the Afghan brought the matter to the attention of Richard J. Gookin, associate chief of protocol, and subsequently gave him a contemporary flag as a replacement.

"Because it is not my business to put up or take down flags," Mr. Gookin recalled, "I turned the flag over to another office."

Desiree Milliken, an Afghan desk officer, picked up the story: "A memo went around to everyone in the bureau who had anything to do with Afghanistan, and a meeting was held." The assembled officials quickly agreed, she said, that what was "obviously not a current flag" had no place in the lobby.

An aide was told to see to it.

Bring In the Lawyers
There ensued a consultation of lawyers. They checked the rulebook and found it offered no advice at all on the question of flag display in the diplomatic lobby. They checked the precedents and found them ambiguous. Cuba has no flag in the lobby. But Libya, currently regarded as a pariah state, has one.

Next a call was made to the department's Office of Flag Regulation, which, it turns out, has little to do with flag regulation but rather does ceremonial events for the Secretary of State. It deferred to the Office of Technical Services, which handles audio equipment, exhibits and, yes, flags.

The dutiful aide assigned to the flag case recalled: "So I called Technical Services, and the guy said, 'Yeah, sure, we'll take down your flag. Which country?' I said, 'You don't want a memo?'

Within hours, the anonymous custodian had removed the flag and slid over the flags of Algeria and Antigua to fill the empty space. The final question was the question of the new flag. Surely, the diplomats reasoned, it would be offensive to visiting Freedom Fighters to fly the flag of the oppressive regime. Yet would it not offend the Afghan charge to decide not to put it up at all?

And so, after its moment of action, the State Department demonstrated that inertia, too, has its hand-wringing precedent. They checked the precedents and found them ambiguous. Cuba has no flag in the lobby. But Libya, currently regarded as a pariah state, has one.

"The issue," said one diplomat, "is under study. It will be under study for some time."

from: The New York Times
14 January 1986
Dear Friends,

Demands on my time have dictated that I relinquish the positions of editor of NAVA NEWS and Chairman of the Publications Committee.

I ask your forgiveness for the delay in getting out the last two issues of our newsletter. Factors beyond this mortal's control were to blame, but I'm sure you will be pleased with the finished products when they are mailed to you by Bill Spangler in Oaks, Pa.

It has, like life itself, been a sweet and, at times, a bitter experience serving the cause of vexillology in general and you in particular. Hopefully, we have all become wiser and richer for it.

Mr. Thomas Carrier, our Recording Secretary, has been appointed by the President, Mrs. Grace Rogers Cooper, to act as editor beginning with the May-June 1986 issue of NAVA NEWS. He will need your cooperation and encouragement.

My deepest appreciation to all of you who helped over the years to make NAVA NEWS what it is today. Blessings, manifold, on those who will make it what it will become tomorrow.

Sincerely,

John R.B. Szala

JRBS/an