



Written by [John White](#) on May 25, 2009

## The American Flag

Even men, the more stoic segment of society, are choked up with emotion, and you can “feel” a unity among Americans. The same type of response can often be experienced at parades when a color guard marches by carrying the Stars and Stripes — no matter what the music being played.

What is it about the American flag that provokes such a response? Well, the answer is “everything.” The flag of the United States of America is an emblem of our country’s ideals, principles, values, and traditions. It is the sense of America’s history and its vast contribution to human betterment, including the service many Americans gave to the country’s armed forces and the bloody cost of protecting and preserving that contribution. It represents the total experience of America and the American people from the founding of our nation to the present. It also represents our philosophy of government — a recognition that life, liberty, personal sovereignty, individual rights, human dignity, and the opportunity to pursue happiness are given to us by God because that is the only basis that can guarantee those blessings for everyone. Last of all, it represents our great traditions, institutions, and ideals: national sovereignty, representative government in a constitutional federal republic, the rule of law, and people of diverse backgrounds living and working together as free citizens.



It is the symbol of the most enduring free people who have ever lived.

And although our flag is a symbol, it is also considered to be a living thing. President Woodrow Wilson said, “Though silent, it speaks to us — speaks to us of the past; of the men and women who went before us and of the record they wrote into it.”

Other icons of American freedom — the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, the Capitol, the Statue of Liberty, the bald eagle, Uncle Sam — have their places in our hearts. They convey the meaning of our national experience in various ways and serve well the process of citizen education about our precious heritage. But the majesty and grandeur of the flag flying freely against the sky is the most powerful



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focal point for Americans who carry forward the dream of liberty and justice for all.

The official name of our flag is “The Flag of the United States of America.” It is also referred to as the National Flag, National Ensign, National Color, and National Standard. However, as with a good friend, Americans speak of our flag by nicknames: the Stars and Stripes; the Star-spangled Banner; Old Glory; the Red, White, and Blue. It is the fourth oldest national flag in the world, after Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

In an earlier era, when warriors marched into battle behind their regimental and national colors (and children played “Capture the Flag,” knowing what that meant), our flag was regarded by our soldiers as the rallying point of action. It represented everything for which they fought — home, corps, and country — and it contained the honor, valor, and hopes of every man around it. “Our flag must never falter, touch the ground in defeat or be lowered to an enemy,” they silently said, and they guarded it courageously, even unto death. The greatest shame in battle was to surrender one’s flag to a victor, but the American flag has been unvanquished.

*Yes, we’ll rally round the flag, boys, we’ll rally once again,  
Shouting the battle cry of Freedom*

— “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” George Frederick Root, 1863

The great American heritage of freedom is the most precious possession of the entire world. Because our flag embodies that glorious achievement and ideal, it is worthy of our honor, our affections, our deepest sacrifices. We revere the flag, not through unquestioning worship but from a deep appreciation of our national heritage and from gratitude for our good fortune to be Americans. What other nation in all of human history has stated, as the Preamble to our Constitution does, that it was founded “in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity”? In our flag we see our nation itself and the proud history upon which it stands.

Equally important is how others see our flag. Floating from the lofty pinnacle of American idealism, it is a beacon of enduring hope to the oppressed of all lands. It floats over an assemblage of people from every race, creed, and color whose united hearts constitute an indivisible and invincible force for the defense and aid of the downtrodden. It proclaims liberty and justice for all people.

## **The Design of the Flag**

When our flag was created on June 14, 1777, no records were left to explain the meaning of its colors. Their meaning was first stated in 1782 in a report to Congress by the committee charged with designing the Great Seal of the United States. Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, stated that the seal’s escutcheon has the same colors and meaning as those of the flag. He wrote, “White signifies purity and innocence, Red hardiness & valor, and Blue ... signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice.”

Today it is more broadly — but unofficially — said that red stands for the courage, heroism, and sacrifices of the 44,000,000 men and women who have served in the armed services of our country, and for the blood shed to preserve our liberty; white stands for peacefulness and the purity of our high ideals; and blue, the color of the heavens, connotes the justice, strength, loyalty, and unity of all our states.

The stripes of our flag remind us of the 13 original colonies that constituted America as a new nation and gained us our liberty. The 50 five-pointed stars represent the 50 states bound together as one



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nation. The field of blue is technically called a canton, but is generally called the union or field of stars. According to a booklet about the flag published by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1977, "The star is a symbol of the heavens and the divine goal to which man has aspired from time immemorial; the stripe is symbolic of the rays of light emanating from the sun."

## **The U.S. Flag Code**

The display of our flag is governed by law to assure that it is treated with respect. The U.S. Flag Code prescribes proper display of and respect for the Flag of the United States. It is a guide for all handling and display of our flag. It was established by U.S. Code Title 36, Patriotic Societies and Observances, Chapter 10, "Patriotic Customs." However, the code is dependent upon voluntary conformance. It does not impose penalties for misuse of the flag. That is left to the states and to the federal government of the District of Columbia, though an activist Supreme Court has declared that citizens may disrespect our flag as a form of free speech under the First Amendment.

Before 1923, there were no federal or state regulations governing display of the U.S. flag. At that time the American Legion called for a National Flag Conference to draft a code of flag etiquette for civilians. Representatives of the Army and Navy, which had evolved their own procedures, and 71 private organizations met in Washington, D.C. Their purpose was to provide guidance based on Army and Navy procedures relating to display and associated questions about the U.S. flag.

President Warren G. Harding, in addressing the conference, said, "I hope that you will succeed in formulating a code that will be welcomed by all Americans, and that every patriotic and educational society in the Republic will commit itself to the endorsement and observance and purposes of the code that you adopt here today."

The resulting National Flag Code was adopted by all organizations in attendance, although it had no official government sanction. Nevertheless, it represented the authoritative opinion of the principal patriotic bodies of the nation, both civilian and military. Over time, the National Flag Code became widely accepted. However, it was not until 1942 that Congress passed a joint resolution on the subject and made it the law of our land.

Promotion of respect for the flag and knowledge about it is required in most states, usually through flag exercises, programs, or instruction. However, in 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette et al.* that it is unconstitutional for state boards of education or local school boards to make the flag salute compulsory.

## **Flag Etiquette**

The fundamental rule of flag etiquette is: treat the Stars and Stripes with respect and common sense.

The flag is flown at full-staff to indicate joy — the joy of being American. It is flown at half-staff to indicate mourning. In either case, it should always be aloft and free. It should be hoisted briskly and lowered ceremoniously. When raising the flag to half-staff, raise it to the top of the flagpole for a moment before lowering it. When taking it down for the night, raise it to the top of the flagpole again and then lower it to the bottom.

The flag should never be dipped to any person or thing, nor should it ever be displayed with the union down except as a signal of dire distress. When lowered, it should be received by waiting hands and arms, and should not touch the ground.

The flag should be flown daily from sunrise to sunset in good weather from public buildings, schools,



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permanent staffs in the open, and near polling places on election days. An all-weather flag may also be flown in bad weather. When a patriotic effect is desired, the flag may be displayed 24 hours a day if properly illuminated during the hours of darkness.

The flag should always be flown on national and state holidays and on those occasions proclaimed by the president. On Memorial Day, the flag should be displayed at half-staff until noon.

To store the flag, ceremoniously fold it lengthwise in half, then repeat with the blue field on the outside. Finally, while one person holds it by the blue field, another then makes a triangular fold in the opposite end, continuing to fold it in triangles until only the blue field shows.

The flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever, nor should any picture, drawing, insignia, or other decoration be placed upon or attached to the flag, its staff, or halyard. The flag should not be embroidered on personal items nor printed on anything designed for temporary use and then discarded.

No flag or pennant may be flown above the flag or, if on the same level, to the right of the flag, except during church services conducted by naval chaplains at sea, when the church pennant may be flown above the flag during church services for the personnel of the Navy.

Never throw away a flag! When a flag is no longer of dignified appearance and cannot be repaired, or when a flag is so worn or soiled that it is no longer suitable for display, it should be destroyed in a dignified manner, preferably by burning. In military parlance, it is consigned to the flames in a brief ceremony.

The final flag etiquette lesson for readers is this: when the American flag passes by in a color guard, stop talking, stand at attention, and, when it is six paces away, cross your heart with your right hand until it is six paces past you. Men and boys should remove their hats. People in uniform should salute in the manner prescribed by their organization. If the flag is simply part of a float or is being carried in some way other than in a color guard, no action is necessary.

Although the flag of our nation has undergone many changes throughout our history, none of the earlier flags are considered to be obsolete. They are simply representative of an earlier era. They may be flown as "legal" and are entitled to the same respect as our current-day flag.

To order from a selection of U.S. flags, [click here](#).

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