

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Proclamation 1335 Flag Day, 1916

WOODROW WILSON

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Less than a year after his speech about the flag as an emblem that reflects back our national history and experience (see last selection), President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) was thinking differently about the importance of the flag. It was becoming increasingly clear that American troops would soon be drawn into the world war raging in Europe, and deep divisions of sympathy had emerged among the American people, some partial to Britain and France, others to Germany. Against this background, on May 30, 1916, President Wilson officially proclaimed June 14 “Flag Day” as a commemoration of the “Stars and Stripes,” which had been adopted as the national flag on June 14, 1777.

How do Wilson’s remarks about the flag here differ in tone and message from his speech of 1915? How do you explain the difference? Are the two views of the meaning of Flag Day—and of the flag—compatible with each other? What does Wilson here take to be the relation of America to other nations?

My Fellow Countrymen:

Many circumstances have recently conspired to turn our thoughts to a critical examination of the conditions of our national life, of the influences which have seemed to threaten to divide us in interest and sympathy, of forces within and forces without that seemed likely to draw us away from the happy traditions of united purpose and action of which we have been so proud. It has therefore seemed to me fitting that I should call your attention to the approach of the anniversary of the day upon which the flag of the United States was adopted by the Congress as the emblem of the Union, and to suggest to you that it should this year and in the years to come be given special significance as a day of renewal and reminder, a day upon which we should direct our minds with a special desire of renewal to thoughts of the ideals and principles of which we have sought to make our great Government the embodiment.

I therefore suggest and request that throughout the nation and if possible in every community the fourteenth day of June be observed as FLAG DAY with special patriotic

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exercises, at which means shall be taken to give significant expression to our thoughtful love of America, our comprehension of the great mission of liberty and justice to which we have devoted ourselves as a people, our pride in the history and our enthusiasm for the political programme of the nation, our determination to make it greater and purer with each generation, and our resolution to demonstrate to all the world its vital union in sentiment and purpose, accepting only those as true compatriots who feel as we do the compulsion of this supreme allegiance. Let us on that day rededicate ourselves to the nation, “one and inseparable” from which every thought that is not worthy of our fathers’ first vows in independence, liberty, and right shall be excluded and in which we shall stand with united hearts, for an America which no man can corrupt, no influence draw away from its ideals, no force divide against itself,—a nation signally distinguished among all the nations of mankind for its clear, individual conception alike of its duties and its privileges, its obligations and its rights.

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In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.