

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Meaning of Flag Day

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In this op-ed from June 2011, Amy A. Kass (b. 1940) and Leon R. Kass (b. 1939), educators and co-editors of What So Proudly We Hail, connect the unusual character of the Flag Day holiday with the unusual nature of the American flag and the American republic. What, according to the authors, is unusual about Flag Day? About the flag? About the nation over which it flies? Why do the authors think that our shared ideas and principles are not sufficient to attach us to the American republic? Why do the universality of our principles and the diversity of our population make necessary and desirable our common respect for our singular and separate flag?

Flag Day is unusual. Commemorating the birthday of the American flag, adopted in the midst of the American Revolution by the Second Continental Congress, Flag Day is not an official federal holiday. Instead, by an act of Congress passed in 1949, the president is merely “requested to issue each year a proclamation, calling on United States Government officials to display the flag of the United States on all Government buildings on Flag Day; and urging the people of the United States to observe Flag Day as the anniversary of the adoption on June 14, 1777.”¹ President Obama has again honored that request, as have all his predecessors since President Truman.

Like its birthday, the American flag is unusual, both in looks and significance. Its composition symbolically reflects both the enduring idea and ideal of *E Pluribus Unum*, as well as our evolving national history. As everyone knows, the 13 stripes, alternating red and white, stand for the 13 original colonies and states; each of the 50 stars, white on a field of blue, stands for one of the current 50 states; the constellation of 50 stars standing for the United States as a whole—one out of many. As each new state was added to the Union, the number of stars increased in parallel, but the 13 stripes and the overall structure and colors have (almost always) remained the same. There have been 27 different “official” versions of the American flag, from the so-called Betsy Ross flag of 1777, to the (unique) 15-star, 15-stripe flag about which Francis Scott Key wrote his famous poem, to the current and longest-used flag, adopted on July 4, 1960, after Hawaii was admitted to the Union.

¹ 36 USC § 110 - Flag Day, www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/36/110.

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The flag first served mainly as a military ensign, maritime symbol, or mark of American territory. It began to acquire its iconic character only when it became the symbol of the Union, after the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861. Its standing among us was further increased with the composition in 1892, by Francis Bellamy, of the Pledge of Allegiance, first recited by school children across America later that year in celebration of Columbus Day. In 1931, more than a century after it was written and only after much debate, Congress made “The Star-Spangled Banner” our national anthem—an exceptional anthem for an exceptional nation: The anthem of no other major nation, as far as we know, is about the national flag.

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As with other nations, the flag is the preeminent symbol of our nation (more so than the other two symbols: the eagle and the Great Seal of the United States). It is displayed from public buildings, private homes, ships at sea, and embassies abroad, always in a manner governed by defined protocol. It is waved and saluted on ceremonial occasions, lowered to half-staff to mark the deaths of national leaders or national tragedies, and draped over the coffins of those who have fallen in the nation’s defense. Most of us obey the (unenforced) law that prohibits turning the flag into an article of clothing or otherwise desecrating the flag. Flag burning, though said by the Supreme Court to be a form of protected “speech,” raises the ire of most of our fellow citizens—and quite properly so. For the flag, as symbol of the nation, has a meaning and a function beyond what individual citizens make of it.

The nation over which Old Glory flies is also highly unusual—indeed, exceptional. Alone among the nations of the world, it was self-consciously founded on a set of universal principles, stated as self-evident truths in the Declaration of Independence (equality, individual rights, consent of the governed), and given operative life in the polity established by the Constitution. We Americans are the privileged heirs of a way of life that has offered the blessings of freedom and dignity to millions of people of all races, ethnicities, and religions, extolling the possibility of individual achievement as far as individual talent and effort can take it. And we remain a shining example of self-government and a beacon of hope for oppressed and miserable people all over the world. This is hardly accidental. The very universality of the American principles, applicable to and affirmable by any human being, means that anyone can become in spirit an American, even before coming to these shores. Americans may choose to live in France or China, but we can never become French or Chinese; but anyone can become fully American, simply by embracing our principles—and also by swearing allegiance to the flag and to the Republic for which it stands.

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Paradoxically, it is precisely the universality of American principles and ideals—and the heterogeneity of the American people—that makes respect for the flag so necessary and desirable. The universal philosophical principles can command the assent of the mind. But they cannot by themselves attach the loyalties of the heart. For that we need symbols and songs, stories and speeches. We need holidays and rituals, shared times for remembering and appreciating. We need ordered respite from commerce and amusement—and politicking—for expressions of communal gratitude: for the privilege of living in a republic that enables us to live and work, love and play, freely and with dignity; for the blessing of living under “a grand old flag . . . the emblem of the land I love, the home of the free and the brave.”

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