

Flag Day Address

By Dr. Christopher Huff, June 14, 2015, Tavares, Florida

Every year, the school my six year old daughter attends does a project on the nations of the world. Part of their presentation involves researching the flag of their assigned country. This past year she presented on the United States of America. She was quite proud of the work she had done and for months afterwards, whenever we past an American flag she would point up at it and say excitedly, “Look! It’s MY flag!”

The prideful way she spoke those words had a significant impact on me because the words of my daughter are the clearest and simplest expression of how Americans feel and think about the flag. It is so much more than simply an attractive arrangement of stars and colored stripes. It is a symbol—the greatest symbol—of who we are as a nation and of the values that we cherish. It is indeed my flag but is also, more importantly, OUR flag.

For modern Americans, the flag has come to represent the nation and its values because, from the earliest age, we spend a good deal of time looking at it, speaking about it, and singing about it. Many of the earliest lessons we learn about what it means to be a patriotic American involve the flag. We have been taught to

respect and honor it by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in school. Sporting events from little league games all the way to the World Series, begin by facing the flag and singing the national anthem. And as far as I know, we are the only nation that has a national anthem about its flag. In other words, we face the flag to sing a song about that flag! It is no wonder, then, that Americans have a deep connection to and love for the flag. But, this has not always been the case. How we feel about the flag today was not how Americans in the nation's first years felt and thought about it.

At the nation's founding the flag had a very limited use. Congress passed the first flag resolution on June 14, 1777—two hundred and thirty eight years ago today. It was a brief resolution, stating little more than that the flag should have thirteen alternating red and white stripes and thirteen stars in a blue field. It did not state the proportions or size of the flag. It did not say if there should be more red stripes than white stripes. It did not say how and when the flag should be displayed. And, it did not say how the stars should be arranged.

(One of the most fascinating parts of flag history, by the way, is the story of how those stars were arranged. Everyone one here has known, at best, only three flags, the fifty star flag and, if you are getting up in years just a little bit, the 48 and 49 star flags, and the stars are similarly arranged on each of these flags. If you lived

under any more than that please let me know so I can pry out of you the secret for how to live a very long life. Americans in the 19th Century, however, saw many, many more versions. If you had been born in 1818 and lived to the ripe old age of ninety, you would have lived under twenty different flags, as the nation grew from twenty states to forty six. The next time you have some spare time on your hands, I encourage you to look up not only the official designs of these flags but some of the proposed versions. Aspiring American flag designers had great imaginations when it came to arranging those stars).

We are not exactly sure why the designer of the first flag chose the particular arrangement of stars and stripes used, but we do know who that designer was—a man named Francis Hopkinson. Born in Philadelphia, he resided in New Jersey when the Revolutionary War broke out. He was elected to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. In the new United States government he served as a member of the Navy Board.

It make sense that a member of the Navy Board would design the first flag since the flag at this time was meant to do little more than be a means of identification and communication. American ships at sea would be able to identify each other using the flag and

the new flag would be one of several that soldiers could use on smoke-filled battlefields to identify their units.

For the first several decades of the nation's history, this is how things remained. As a result, Americans held little reverence for the flag because, quite simply, they did not see it very much. The tradition of owning a flag for personal display had not yet developed. Schools did not display the flag. There was no Pledge of Allegiance. There was no national anthem.

What changed, then? What compelled Americans to develop such devotion and deep feeling for the flag? In a word—conflict. This emotional attachment to the flag emerged out tragedy and triumph of the nation's wars. At times when Americans needed to put their differences aside and rally together to defeat a common foe, it was the flag they chose to rally around. As the nation developed into a world power and our global responsibilities increased, the flag came to symbolize and embody the values and ideas that America was built on and which we wished to see develop in other nations. And on the fortunately few occasions that attacks occurred on American soil, it is the flag that reminded us of what we stood for and what we needed to do.

It took, though, a good deal of time for this process to occur. The War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain did help strengthen what it meant to be an American but did not turn

the flag into the powerful symbol it would become. The explanation for this probably resides in the fact that we had yet to make a final decision on what the flag should actually look like. The most famous flag in American history—the Star Spangled Banner, which flew over Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore—had fifteen stripes not thirteen. Congress had passed a Second Flag Act in 1794 and increased the number of stripes to represent the two new states which had joined the nation. It would not be until 1818 that Congress would settle permanently on the thirteen stripe design, choosing to increase only the number of stars as new states entered the Union.

The Civil War marks the true beginnings of our national love for the flag. In a war that divided the nation—a war that forced all Americans to think deeply about our Constitution and the nation’s founding principles—the flag emerged as the most powerful symbolic embodiment of those abstract concepts. For the first time, the flag appeared everywhere. They flew outside homes and were hoisted above all kinds of businesses and government offices. Union soldiers carried “bible flags” into battle with them—so-called because they were so small they could fit inside a personal bible. The flag was printed on stationery and envelopes. Numerous songs were written specifically about the flag. And the song penned by Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812, “The

Star –Spangled Banner,” transitioned from being an ordinary if popular tune into a patriotic anthem—its first major step towards become our national anthem.

While the flag played a prominent role in a divided nation, it played an even more important role in a reunited one. The flag was everywhere during the nation’s 100th centennial celebration a little over a decade after the end of the Civil War. At the Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia, the “Origin of Our Flag” exhibit proved particularly popular. During the late 19th Century, veteran’s groups and other patriotic individuals undertook various campaigns to educate Americans about the flag and advocate for national celebrations of the flag and its history. B.J. Cigrand, a teacher at a one room schoolhouse in Wisconsin, began a campaign in 1885 to create a national Flag Day holiday. Aided by politicians and other patriotic organizations, Flag Day celebrations became increasingly popular in small towns, cities and states around the nation over the next several decades. Cigrand’s efforts came to full fruition when President Truman signed an act of Congress designating June 14 as National Flag Day. As of 2015, though, Flag Day has yet to be declared an official federal holiday.

When America went overseas in the 20th Century, the flag went with her. During the First World War, recruiting posters often

used images of the flag to stir the patriotic call to duty in young Americans.

The development of photography and movies strengthened the ability of Americans to understand the powerful connection between the flag and the innumerable acts of bravery and sacrifice American troops performed over the years. There is more iconic flag photograph than that of five U.S. Marines and a Navy sailor raising a U.S. flag atop Mt. Suribachi during the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima. When published, the photo went viral—in 1945 terms. Republished throughout the country, it gave Americans hope that the war would soon be over. The photo is all the more profound knowing that three of the men who raised the flag would die in combat within a few days of the photo being taken.

Americans of this generation have their own iconic picture of the flag—one that helps us understanding the feelings generated by the Iwo Jima photograph for those who lived through the Second World War. Shortly after 5 P.M. on September 11, 2001, a newspaper photographer snapped a picture of three firefighters raising an American flag at Ground Zero. For those of us who remember those events, no words can truly explain what we felt that day. But looking at that image, seeing that flag being hoisted aloft just hours after one of the nation's worst tragedies occurred, never fails to bring all those feelings back. The image of that flag

gave us hope—we understood who we were as a nation, we knew what it meant to be American, and we realized that as bad as things seemed, they would be put right.

The flag that flew over Fort McHenry—the Star Spangled Banner, is located at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. The flag that flew over Mt. Suribachi is located just a short drive away at the National Museum of the Marine Corps. The flag raised at Ground Zero is, unfortunately, currently missing.

As I look around at the multitude of flags here today and the various ways in which they are on display, I am reminded on one particular use of the flag I saw a great deal after the 9/11 attacks. In the days and weeks after the attacks I began seeing an increasingly number of patriotic bumper stickers on cars. The most common had an image of the flag and next to it were the words—“These Colors Don’t Run.” Almost one hundred and fifty years earlier, at the start of the Civil War, a sign painter in New York attached a flag over his door. On that flag were the words, “Colors, warranted not to run.” America has changed a great deal in the years between when that flag was displayed and when Americans put that bumper sticker on their cars. One thing that has not changed is the ever-growing respect and admiration we have for the flag and the ideas that we see imbedded in it. Thank You.

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