

Wave It or Wear It?

The United States Flag as a Fashion Icon

Laura K. Kidd

The flag of the United States is one of the most powerful and beloved symbols of our nation. Clothing and appearance choices are powerful and symbolic methods that people use to express beliefs and viewpoints. Both of these facts have not escaped the attention of manufacturers and retailers of consumer goods, including the fashion industry. In recent decades, the use of the United States flag in fashion apparel and accessory items has accelerated and become quite profitable; designers such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger have made millions of dollars from the use of flag-themed products in their clothing and soft goods lines. Wal-Mart and other retailers have also profited from selling a wide variety of flag-themed apparel and accessories. A recent search on Google for 'flag clothing' and 'U.S. flag clothing' listed over 4 million hits, most of them for clothing that is available for purchase.¹ So prolific is the use of the U.S. flag in clothing and accessory items that a strong argument could be made that the United States flag has become a fashion icon, an item that has endured the test of time. But has the flag always been a fashion icon? This essay will look at 'fashionable' uses of our nation's flag, as well as who was most likely to promote and follow that trend.

The Flag as Fashion, Late 1700s to the Civil War

No paintings, etchings, sketches, or commentary from the late 1770s has been discovered that suggest that American colonial citizens wore flag-



Figure 2. *Brother Jonathan, in red-and-white striped trousers and star-spangled coat.*
 From Harper's Weekly, 11 January 1862, p. 32.

generic American colonial, the Yankee was typically illustrated wearing soldier garb, with a military jacket and a tricorne hat or Phrygian cap³ (Figure 1). By the Revolutionary War, the Yankee was more commonly referred to as Yankee Doodle or Brother Jonathan, still typically costumed as a Revolutionary War soldier. None of these characters appear to have any of the design elements of the flag incorporated in their costumes.

After the Revolutionary War, the costume for this character changed from militaristic to patriotically fashion-forward. By 1783, Yankee Doodle/Brother Jonathan was illustrated wearing the latest style for men—long trousers and a top hat. Now a symbol of the United States, Yankee Doodle/Brother Jonathan wore red and white striped trousers and a blue tailcoat, often with star motifs (Figure 2). A feather also commonly trimmed the top hat. The characters and their names appear to have been used interchangeably until 1813; often, the only way to distinguish between the two is by reading the captions that accompany the cartoons or illustrations (Figure 3).



Figure 3 (left). *Yankee Doodle*, from an undated song sheet for the song “Yankee Doodle” [sic]. Figure 4 (right). A photograph of ‘Uncle Sam’, 1898. From the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, Repr. #LC-USZ62-77900. Retrieved from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query>.

Also during this time, the character of Brother Jonathan was frequently used by stage comics in sketches and vignettes in variety shows, the predecessors of vaudeville shows. The costume used for the iconic figure of Brother Jonathan was taken from published cartoons of the character. By 1815, the character of Brother Jonathan was gradually being replaced by another figure, Uncle Sam. Similar to Brother Jonathan, Uncle Sam was costumed in red and white striped trousers and a star-spangled blue tail coat; a visual distinction was that typically Uncle Sam had a beard and Brother Jonathan was clean-shaven. During the Civil War, all three figures—Yankee Doodle, Brother Jonathan, and Uncle Sam—were used in political cartoons and illustrations, but, by the turn of the century, Uncle Sam had become the dominant representation of the United States (Figure 4).

Fashioning Lady Columbia

Another figure that incorporated the design elements of the United States flag during the 1700s and 1800s was the female figure that person-



Figure 5 (left). A representation of Columbia from a late 19th-century phonographic cylinder. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Images:ColumbiaHerselfSmall.jpg>.



Figure 6 (right). Columbia in typical 1878 fashion on the cover of Harper's Weekly, 4 May, 1878. Retrieved from www.philaprintshop.com/polcrtoon.html.

ified freedom, Columbia, also referred to as Lady Columbia, Liberty, or Lady Liberty in the early years of the Republic (Figure 5). The usual costume for this allegorical figure was similar to the garments worn by the Greek goddess Athena: a Greek *chiton* (either pure white or red-and-white striped)⁴ and a Phrygian cap. Often, Columbia is wearing a breastplate or holding a shield emblazoned with stars and stripes, in the style of federal government seals. Although the usual depictions of the Columbia/Liberty figure are in variations of Greek costume with flag design elements (Figure 6), during the Civil War and into the 1870s the figure was often portrayed in current fashion (Figure 7).

During the 1880s, when France presented the U.S. with *Liberty Enlightening the World*, more commonly called the Statue of Liberty, the Columbia and Liberty figures start to evolve into separate representations. The costume used for Columbia reverts back to the Greek costume, with the flag design elements and the Phrygian cap. The costume used for Liberty is usually a copy of the garments on the Statue of Liberty, including the distinctive crown of seven spikes.



Figure 7. Kerchief with colonial flags surrounding General Washington.
 From Collins, *Threads of History*, Plate 1, p. 48.

Fashioning Memories

The flag and its design elements were popular in the early days of the American republic as motifs on wallpapers and home furnishing fabrics.⁵ There is no evidence that the flag or its design elements were used in the manufacture of clothing such as dresses, shirts, trousers, jackets, coats, or vests. However, the flag was a popular motif on fashion accessory items made from square, flat, printed textiles, known as bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs.

Bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs were fashion accessories used chiefly by men and occasionally by women. Although the terms were used interchangeably during the 19th century,⁶ kerchiefs appear to have been used primarily to cover the head or shoulders; bandannas and handker-

chiefs were used to wipe the face or nose. Bandannas are made from cotton fabrics; kerchiefs and handkerchiefs can be constructed from silk, linen, or cotton fabrics.

Bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs were first used as commemorative textiles noting a special event or historic anniversary. The first commemorative textile with a flag motif is a linen kerchief printed to honor General George Washington⁷ (Figure 7). Washington is on horseback in the center of the kerchief, surrounded by four popular colonial flags: the Gadsen flag (Don't Tread on Me), the Sons of Liberty flag, the Pine Tree flag, and the Colonial Red Ensign. Images were printed using two shades of red on a white background. This textile has been dated to circa 1775-1778. If printed after the passing of the First Flag Act in June 1777, the designer did not use the 'official' United States flag as a design motif. Perhaps the textile designer did not know that there was now an 'official' U.S. flag—or the new flag did not have meaning to the designer.⁸

The earliest use of the U.S. flag on a commemorative bandanna celebrates the victory of the Battle of New Orleans, and dates from 1815 or 1816.⁹ A kerchief from 1819 also used the flag as a motif.¹⁰ Another kerchief was printed to commemorate General Lafayette's visit to Castle Garden, New York in 1824.¹¹ Interestingly, the colors used for this kerchief are tan and yellow and the main motifs are pairs of crossed 13-star flags, accented by wreaths and an overall floral pattern. As the nation started to celebrate her history, commemorative bandannas, kerchiefs and handkerchiefs were a standard souvenir issued for celebrations and events, including the U.S. centennial,¹² the Chicago World's Fair,¹³ "Presidential Victims of Assassinations,"¹⁴ the Louisiana Purchase and Exposition in St. Louis,¹⁵ and the "Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition."¹⁶ Flag-themed textiles were also struck to commemorate the Spanish American War,¹⁷ World War I¹⁸ and World War II.¹⁹

Fashioning Politicians

Not surprisingly, the majority of bandannas, kerchiefs, and handker-



Figure 8. Flag bandanna from the 1840 presidential campaign. From Collins, Threads of History, Plate 136, p. 103.

chiefs with the flag as a central design motif were used by politicians as campaign materials. The first recorded use of the flag on a campaign bandanna was in the 1840 presidential campaign, also the first year that the U.S. flag was used in presidential campaign advertisements.²⁰ Presidential candidate William Henry Harrison used the flag on a wide variety of kerchiefs and bandannas, likely given away to prospective voters (Figure 8). In the 19th century, these printed textiles were commonly used during rallies

by waving them to show support for a candidate after a speech or during a public appearance. Following current fashion practices, these textiles were also draped to hang out of a gentleman's back frockcoat pocket, serving as a decorative political advertisement. Of course, bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs also served a practical function and were used to wipe one's nose, mouth, or brow. From the 1840s campaign through the 1970s, bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs were political campaign staples, but their use in campaigns appear to have diminished at the end of the 1970s.

By the 1860s, there is evidence that the flag was being used as a design motif on fabric used for clothing. An infant's dress from the 1860s was sewn from bleached cotton fabric printed with flag and cannon motifs. The flag is prominently featured at full mast.²¹

Also from the Civil War era is a curious example of the flag used in a

clothing item. On a picture envelope from the Civil War era, a red, white, and blue bonnet with the caption “New Quaker Bonnet” is displayed; the brim of the bonnet is red and white stripes and the soft crown is stars on a blue fabric (Figure 9).²² The New Quaker Bonnet is in the exact style of real Quaker bonnets worn during that era, which are usually in shades of brown, black, or gray. There is no evidence that this bonnet was actually constructed and worn by anyone, much less a pacifist Quaker woman, but the combination of the flag and such a distinctive cultural item of clothing to indicate political sympathies attests to the powerful symbolic meaning in many design and clothing choices.

The Flag as Fashion, Post-Civil War to the Early 20th Century

After the Civil War, the public’s affection and sentiment for the national flag was at an all-time high. Since the 1830s, the flag was used to advertise a wide variety of consumer goods, and this practice increased after the Civil War. The flag was also still used as political campaign materials, namely bandannas, kerchiefs, and handkerchiefs. In 1889 and 1890, the flag was part of the design of two bandannas and aprons, which were fashioned from the same printed fabrics. The

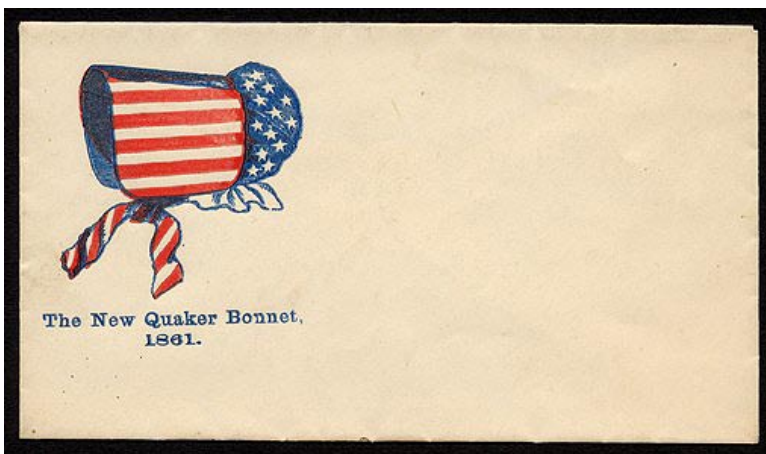


Figure 9. The “New Quaker Bonnet 1861” envelope. From Roosevelt Civil War Envelopes Collection (GT). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1961/1700>.

1889 bandanna and apron commemorate the 1789 term of the first president, George Washington, and the 1889 term of the current president, Benjamin Harrison.²³ The 1890 bandanna and apron celebrate the Cotton Centenary, commemorating the introduction of Samuel Slater's cotton-spinning machinery in 1790.²⁴ No other evidence was located that showed the use of the flag in regular clothing items. This would change with the Spanish American War.

Fashioning Patriotism

The Spanish American War was the first time since the Civil War that our nation went into battle united under one flag and many citizens felt an intense feeling of patriotism and a strong sense of nationalism. Manufacturers and retailers, eager to capitalize on public sentiment for the flag, increased their use of the flag in advertising products. Apparel manufacturers also followed suit and, unlike previous wars, produced and sold a wide range of flag-related clothing and accessory items: flag lapel pins, flag buttons, belt buckles, red-white-and-blue neckwear, hatbands, parasols, ribbons, garters, petticoats, and stockings.²⁵ There was even an account of one of the most popular items of women's wear, the shirtwaist, designed specifically using the flag and flag motifs.²⁶

The use of the flag and its design elements in clothing and accessory items was not universally endorsed or supported. By 1895, a serious flag protection movement had started with adherents very concerned about what they perceived as a growing lack of respect and reverence for the flag. In an interview published in *The New York Tribune* on 19 May 1898, a Brooklyn woman stated "Do I think it shows true respect to our flag to see it made up into gowns, fashioned into shirt waists, turned into petticoats, and utilized for stockings? Most assuredly, I do not".²⁷ Still, many people believed that the use of the flag in clothing was an appropriate way to demonstrate patriotism, no matter how excessive the total design sense might be.²⁸ Some observers of this trend were more cynical, questioning the sincerity and commitment of Americans who wore flag fashions. A brief commentary "Mercurial Americans" from *The Washington Post*, re-

published in *The New York Times* on 6 November 1898, stated

Mlle. Rhea said to me last Spring, when we were all wearing flag stick-pins and fastening our shirtwaists with army buttons, something I disputed at the time: "Ah," said she, "You Americans are as fickle, as mercurial, as changeable as we French. In two, three months the war will be over. Three weeks, a month, you will have forgotten it. You will not cheer, you will not care."

I thought it was absurd then, but now I perceive that the spirit of prophecy is not wholly dead among us. We are tired of cheering already.²⁹

The financial success of manufacturing and selling flag clothing and related items is not known. Nor is it clear how deeply such flag use infiltrated current fashion. Fashion and costume history books generally give a good indication of fashion trends that were widely adopted. Costume history books acknowledge the military influence that is often seen in current fashions (e.g., hat styles, colors, braid trim, buttons, etc.), but there are no pictures or references in fashion history books that show examples of flag-themed fashion in the 18th, 19th, or early 20th centuries. The absence of flag clothing examples suggests that this was less a trend than a fad.

As a fad, flag dresses and fashions might have been considered as 'fancy dress', a term that was used to generally refer to clothing that was worn for special occasions, such as Memorial Day and Flag Day celebrations. Examples of flag clothing as 'fancy dress' are illustrated in cabinet cards and postcards from the early 1900s that show girls and young women in flag dresses (Figure 10, a, b, and c).



Figure 10 (a). Postcard showing women wearing dresses likely constructed out of bunting. Retrieved from <http://vintagepostcards.com>



Figure 10(b). Cabinet card by Howard of Edwardsville, Illinois, featuring a young girl pictured in a dress made from stylized flag fabrics.
The Collection of Jack and Beverly Wilgus



*Figure 10(c). Cabinet card by Maffery of Cresco, Iowa, showing a girl in a flag dress with a stars and stripes sash waking another young girl.
The Collection of Jack and Beverly Wilgus*

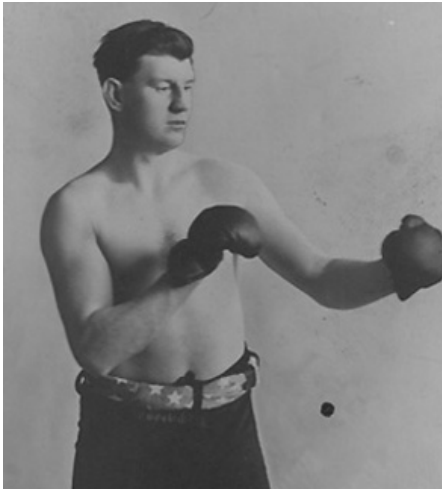


Figure 11. Photograph of Sandy Ferguson, wearing a U.S. flag tied around his waist. Retrieved from www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/sfERG.html

Fashioning Entertainment

Even with the growing flag protection movement, the flag continued to be used as a costume. One group in the forefront of the flag protection movement was the Daughters of the American Revolution, and complaints were registered with them in the mid-1890s about the flag being used “as a costume to bedeck stilt walkers, circus clowns, prize fighters, and variety players or gaiety girls.”³⁰ In a picture of Canadian-born boxer Sandy Ferguson, a United

States flag is shown tied around his waist, perhaps being used as a totem of protection and nationalism (Figure 11). An example of what is most likely a stage costume is a cabinet card from Swords Brothers of New York. In the photo, a small girl named ‘Baby Sutton’ is wearing a dress made out of U.S. flags. Her pose and her name ‘Baby Sutton’ suggest that this is a publicity shot of a very young vaudeville performer (Figure 12).

Fashioning Culture

Surprisingly, European Americans were not the most frequent users of the United States flag as a major design motif on clothing. The largest group of surviving flag-themed garments were made and worn by Native Americans. Adult and children’s clothing, tourist goods, and traditional warrior items were often embellished with the flag of the United States.³¹ Unlike native-born European Americans who used the flag in their clothing to symbolize the triumph of manifest destiny, Native American flag use had different associations, such as power and protection.³² Incorporating the national flag into clothing was also a way that many Native Amer-



*Figure 12. 'Baby Sutton' wearing a dress made completely from U.S. flags.
The Collection of Jack and Beverly Wilgus*

icans believed would identify them as friends of the United States. Using the United States flag as a decorative motif may also have allowed Native Americans to retain the use of their clothing traditions and handcrafts a bit longer, as they faced a future under a government whose policy towards their culture was one of total assimilation.³³

United States flags used in Native American clothing and accessory items are often stylized. Often, because of space and materials, artisans made changes to the actual appearance of the flag, especially in woven beadwork or quillwork, such as eliminating some of the thirteen stripes, or changing the five-pointed star to a four-pointed star.³⁴ No matter how the artisan may have altered the flag, however, the flag is still recognizable as the flag of the United States. Although the vast majority of the flags are decorative motifs, there is one image of a woman living on a reservation who is wearing a dress made entirely out of flags (Figure 13).³⁵

The Flag as Fashion, Early-20th Century to the 1960s

Fashioning Protest

In the late 1920s, many textile workers—the majority of them female—held protest strikes against major textile producers in the South. Unlike earlier strikers in 1909, most of whom were immigrants and only held American flags during marches and on protest lines, this “second generation” of women strikers had been born in the United States.³⁶ These native-born Americans, not just content to hold the flag, instead incorporated the flag and its design motifs in the clothing that they wore as they picketed.³⁷ Known as “liberty girls”,³⁸ they constructed clothing ensembles in combinations of red, white, and blue bunting; some strikers even used actual flags in the construction of their garments. One striker, Mary Costa, was referred to as Miss Liberty, and wore a garment in the style of the figure of freedom Columbia.³⁹

One colorful encounter with a striker wearing flag protest clothing was the cross-examination of single mother Trixie Perry. On trial in 1929 for her participation in the American Bemberg rayon mill strike at Elizabethton, Tennessee, Miss Perry came to the stand wearing a red, white,



Figure 13. Photograph of a dress made from a roll of flag fabric, worn by Mrs. Isabel Bellecour, White Earth, Minnesota, ca. 1915. Reprinted with permission from the Minnesota Historical Society (Photograph Collection, Location No. E97.1Br4, Negative no. 6785).

and blue dress made from bunting and accessorized by a cap made of an American flag. The prosecuting attorney started his questioning:

“You have a United States flag as a cap on your head?”

“Yes.”

“Wear it all the time?”

“Whenever I take a notion.”

“You are dressed in a United States flag, and the colors?”

“I guess, so, I was born under it, guess I have a right to.”⁴⁰

These young strikers were often ridiculed in the press for their clothing choices, particularly for their use of the United States flag in their protest attire.⁴¹ Yet these young women, only one generation removed from their immigrant ancestors, realized the symbolic power of the flag. They were communicating visually the belief in their entitlement to pursue the American life, with all material benefits.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the flag continued to be used as a design motif in bandannas and kerchiefs used during presidential election years. Flag jewelry (such as gemstone flag pins, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings) was especially popular during World War II and the post-war era. In 1942, the U.S. Flag Code was issued and specifically addressed the use of the flag as clothing or on clothing in Section 8, “Respect for the flag”, parts (d), (i), and (j):

(d) The flag should never be used as wearing apparel, bedding, or drapery. . .

(i) The flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever. It should not be embroidered on such articles as cushions or handkerchiefs and the like, printed or otherwise impressed on paper napkins or boxes or anything that is designed for temporary use and discard. . .

(j) No part of the flag should ever be used as a costume or athletic uniform. However, a flag patch may be affixed to the uniform of military personnel, firemen, policemen, and members of patriotic organizations. The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing. Therefore, the lapel flag pin being a replica, should be worn on the left lapel near the heart.

Whether the U.S. Flag Code was a significant factor in discouraging people to wear flag clothing is not clear. If there were any violations of the Flag Code, authorities usually looked the other way, not only at those wearing flag clothing, but those who used the flag in any commercial manner.⁴² Perhaps, especially during the war years, flag clothing was considered as appropriate for some occasions, such as the celebration of the end of the war preserved in a photograph of a young girl in a flag dress surround by a group of happy GIs.⁴³ In the 1950s, Americans people started decorating their new suburban homes in 'colonial' style décor, which often included the flag in wallpapers and home furnishing fabrics. Apparently, such uses were uncontroversial and were generally accepted by the public and the government.

The Flag as Fashion, 1960s to the Present

Fashioning Conflict

The modern debate over the 'correct' use of the flag in clothing started in the 1960s. One incident concerning flags and clothing occurred because of the admission of Alaska and Hawaii into the Union, rendering 48- and 49-star flags obsolete. Instead of disposing of the old flags in the correct way, by burning, many of these flags were bundled up and sold to other countries, to be used in clothing or as rags. One resourceful manufacturer even used the old flags as pocket linings in boys' jackets. In 1964, the Long Island merchant who was selling these jackets decided to remove the jackets from the stores after receiving customer complaints.⁴⁴ In another incident, the Treo Company of New York, a manufacturer of ladies' support garments, created the 'Stars 'n Stripes' panty girdle. The girdle's design consisted of red and white stripes and blue stars on a white back-

ground. The Daughters of the American Revolution immediately launched into an attack, condemning the company and demanding the instant recall of the girdles. The Treo Company recalled over 3,000 of the panty girdles, vowing to "...burn the damn things or send them to some foreign country where our flag isn't involved."⁴⁵ The incident, instead of hurting the Treo Company, resulted in the company being extolled for its quick action in recalling the offending items.⁴⁶

By the late 1960s, the use of the flag on clothing became a social and political battlefield. In the late Sixties, the flag became a divisive symbol, used by both hawks and doves to support their viewpoints on the war in Vietnam. Both groups wore the flag, but in very different ways. Members of the establishment, the hawks, generally wore the flag in the form of a lapel pin or flag patches over their hearts or on their sleeves. Members of the anti-establishment, the doves, wore flag shirts and vests, used flags as shawls or blankets, and wore flag patches on their blue jeans, often over holes in the seat or knees of their jeans. To members of the establishment, ultimate disrespect to the flag was its use as or on clothing, especially as a patch on blue jeans by young anti-establishment war protesters.

By the 1960s, 48 of the 50 states had flag desecration statutes and, in 1968, a federal flag desecration law was passed, which banned any display of 'contempt' directed against the flag, but addressed no other potential flag desecration issues. Most of the flag desecration statutes were initiated to provide a way to punish people who, as form of protest, burned the flag. But many people were concerned about the broad, vague language in the state and federal statutes. In March 1968, an article in the *Michigan Law Review* reviewing a recently passed New York statute on flag desecration, suggested that a broad interpretation of the statute would make wearing flag clothing a form of desecration.⁴⁷

The article in the *Michigan Law Review* was correct in its prediction that wearing flag-themed clothing would be considered as a form of desecration. A number of cases specifically involving flag-themed clothing were prosecuted in the late 1960s and 1970s under state statutes. Some involved wearing flag vests, but most involved wearing flag patches on blue jeans, trousers, or denim jackets. Of all the cases that captured the

public's attention, the case of *Hoffman v. United States* is the most memorable. In 1968, the Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman was arrested in the District of Columbia for wearing a shirt that appeared to be made out of an American flag.⁴⁸ His original conviction was a 30-day jail term and a fine of \$100. The District of Columbia Appeals Court threw the case out, deciding that the shirt, purchased at a department store, only resembled the flag and was not cut and sewn out of a flag.⁴⁹ Many cases similar to Hoffman's were overturned, although some convictions were upheld. Court decisions appeared entirely subjective, with the most vocal protesters wearing flag-themed clothing receiving the harshest punishments.⁵⁰

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, flag-themed apparel items are commonplace. Wearing flag-related apparel and accessory items accelerated after the attacks on 11 September 2001, and are particularly popular at celebrations such as the Fourth of July and other patriotic events. But there appears to be a shift in who is most likely to wear flag-themed clothing. In the 1960s and early 1970s, people most likely to be wearing flag-themed clothing (and clothing actually made from flags) were 'hippies', 'yippies', and anti-war protesters—anti-establishment liberals. Today, people most likely to be wearing flag-themed clothing tend to identify themselves as conservative, with a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism.⁵¹ This cultural shift relates to flags and their role as a symbol and how that symbol is used by a culture or society. As symbols, flags create solidarity and unity, represent common interests and points of reference; flags are used by groups to release emotions important in developing nationalism. When apparel items use the flag as the dominant design motif, the apparel items also become symbols. Both anti-establishment and establishment groups used the symbolic meanings inherent in flag-themed apparel items, and both groups believed they 'owned' the symbol—the flag—and its symbolic meaning. As the groups battled for ownership of the symbolic meaning of the flag, political viewpoints moved from anti-establishment to establishment (or from left to right), with the establishment becoming the dominant cultural and political group. As 'owners' of the symbol, the use of the flag in apparel items was culturally sanctioned, even endorsed, because flag-themed items represented their political point of view.

The appropriation of the flag in apparel items is not without irony. For example, although Abbie Hoffman was arrested for wearing his flag shirt in 1968, on Memorial Day 2005, Joint Chiefs Chairman Air Force General Richard Myers was photographed at a Rolling Thunder biker rally wearing a flag shirt very similar to Hoffman's.⁵² Myers was not arrested, nor was he even asked to leave the rally. Shirts that appear to be identical to the one worn by Hoffman are available for sale over the Internet and in numerous retail stores, and apparently, are purchased and worn with little concern of arrest and conviction. The Long Island merchant in the 1960s removed jackets for sale that used old flags as pocket linings, but former President George H. W. Bush was photographed proudly showing off his flag-lined suit jacket to two young boys.⁵³ The Treo Company recalled 3,000 'Stars 'n Stripes' girdles; today, flag-themed bikinis, thong underwear, jockstraps, 'grapeholders', bras, boxer shorts, and briefs can be purchased in most department stores, and literally flood the Internet. No doubt many people would consider that these items cross not only the boundaries of respect and dignity, but also of good taste.

At times, the issue of wearing flag-themed clothing has polarized United States society. Many people believe wearing flag clothing proves patriotism; some believe wearing flag clothing borders on hypocrisy; still others simply believe it is disrespectful to wear flag clothing items. Technically, the use of the flag in most of the available flag-themed apparel items does constitute a violation of the U.S. Flag Code, as well as most state flag desecration statutes. But, if a stricter federal flag desecration amendment were to be passed, the courts might find themselves in a long, messy, and confusing process of deciding what and what does not constitute flag desecration when the flag is used on or as clothing. Perhaps the courts will remove flag-themed clothing and accessory items from the flag desecration debate altogether, referring instead to a 1971 federal district court opinion involving a North Carolina flag desecration case involving red, white, and blue trousers. In the words of the court: "It seems to us that red, white, and blue trousers, with or without stars, are trousers and not a flag, and that it is beyond the state's competence to dictate color and design of clothing, even bad taste clothing."⁵⁴

But what might ultimately decide the debate over flag-themed apparel items may have nothing to do with good taste versus bad taste, liberal versus conservative, or respect versus desecration. The consumer culture in the United States has turned the national flag into a commercial product, blurring the consideration of flag-themed apparel items as desecration.⁵⁵ Flag-themed apparel and other items are good business, and, as long as the demand is there, the supply will keep coming. But the right to purchase and wear the national symbol may also reflect a desire to establish a national identity. Unlike many European nations, the United States lacks shared cultural symbols that help define national identity,⁵⁶ such as a royal family, a national religion, or an ethnic costume. The flag has filled that role, and become a sacred cultural symbol that establishes our national identity. To the multi-ethnic community of consumers who live in the United States, the purchase of flag-themed apparel items may represent the purchase of a national identity.⁵⁷ For, after all, what is more American than to get what you pay for?



Endnotes

1. Search as of March 23, 2007.
2. "Oh Say, Can You See?: Nationalistic Emblems in the Landscape", Wilbur Zelinsky, *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Winter 1984, p. 277-286.
3. The Phrygian cap is a soft cap from antiquity (a version of this cap was used as part of the costume of the cartoon characters, the Smurfs). During the Roman Empire, former slaves that were given liberty by their owners were gifted with this cap upon their emancipation as a visual symbol of their new status as free citizens. In the 18th century, this cap became increasingly associated with liberty and various movements for freedom in Europe and in the U.S.
4. The Greek chiton is a draped garment made from a rectangle of cloth, fastened at the shoulders and under the arms, usually with a type of pin called a fibula.
5. *Printed Textiles: English and American Cottons and Linens 1700-1850*, Florence M. Montgomery (New York: The Viking Press; 1970), pp. 280, 282, 283, 284, 285, and others; *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth 1775 to the Present*, Herbert Ridgeway Collins (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC; 1979), start p. 55. However, as noted by Collins, it appears that during the early 19th century, the national flag was not the most popular American symbol or motif used in printed textiles. Commemorative textiles were used most commonly for home furnishings, such as upholstery, draperies and bed hangings, and the motifs were generally American scenes and events that "dealt with American scenes and events, covering such subjects as the Revolution, patriots, the Federal Period, and the War of 1812", p. 2. As decorative prints, portraits of George Washington and the eagle appeared to more popular than the flag in antebellum America.
6. Collins, p. 2.
7. Collins, p. 48.
8. Collins, p. 2, states that many believe this textile was designed and printed by Hewson at the request of Martha Washington although this is debated. If Hewson was the designer, it was printed in 1775.
9. Collins, p. 68.
10. Collins, p. 71; Zelinsky, p. 280.
11. Collins, p. 75.
12. Collins, various examples found p. 198-213.
13. Collins, p. 299-301.
14. Collins, p. 339.
15. Collins, p. 341-342.
16. Collins, p. 354.
17. Collins, p. 322-326.
18. Collins, p. 398-402.

19. Collins, p. 475-477.
20. Collins, p. 96-103.
21. Collins, p. 166.
22. "New Quaker Bonnet 1812", on-line, <http://hdl.handle.net/1961/1700>, from the Roosevelt Civil War Envelopes Collection (GT).
23. Collins, p. 284.
24. Collins, p. 286-287.
25. *Saving "Old Glory": The History of the American Flag Controversy*, Robert Justin Goldstein, (Westview Press, Boulder, Colo, 1995) p. 23; "Remember the Maine, boys, and the price of this suit", Rob Schorman, *Historian*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Fall 1998; On-line: Academic Search Premier, html version), ¶ 21.
26. Schorman, ¶ 21.
27. Schorman, ¶ 26.
28. Schorman, ¶26.
29. Accessed from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2003).
30. Goldstein, p. 10 (originally from Guenter, p. 64/Preble, p. 474-76).
31. An excellent source, in color photographs, is *The Flag in American Indian Art*, Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp (New York State Historical Society, Cooperstown NY; 1993). An excellent historical perspective that expands on Herbst and Kopp and the use of the U.S. flag in Native American art can be found in "The Fluidity of Meaning: Flag Imagery in Plains Indian Art", Douglas A. Schmittou and Michael H. Logan, *The American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 26.4, Fall, 2002, p. 559-604 (online: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_indian_quarterly/v026/26.4schmittou.html).
32. Herbst and Kopp, p. 16.
33. Herbst and Kopp, p. 17.
34. "Sheldon Hosts Fenimore House Museum Exhibit of Flags in Native American Art", www.unl.edu/scarlet/v9n18arts.html (No date, retrieved July 19, 2006), ¶ 6.
35. *Labors of Love: America's Textiles and Needlework, 1650-1930*, Judith Reiter Weissman and Wendy Lavitt (Alfred A. Knopf, New York NY; 1987), p. 201.
36. "Striking Ensembles: The Importance of Clothing on the Picket Line", Deirdre Clemente, *Labor Studies Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter, 2006, p. 9.
37. Clemente, p. 9.
38. Clemente, p. 11.
39. *The Strike of '28*, Daniel Georgianna (Spinner Publications, New Bedford, Mass; 1993), p. 122.
40. "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South", Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (1986), p. 373 (from the evidence typescript of *American Bemberg Corp. v. George Miller, et. al.*)

41. Clemente, p. 13.
42. Goldstein, p. 76-77.
43. *Flag: An American Biography*, Marc Leepson (St. Martin's Press, New York, NY; 2005), p. 217.
44. Goldstein, p. 78.
45. Goldstein, p. 101.
46. Unfortunately, there are no images of this subversive panty girdle. There is an artist's rendering of the girdle on Zona: The Girdle Zone's website, <http://girdlezone.org/spangled.html>.
47. "Constitutional Law: Freedom of Speech: Desecration of National Symbols as Protected Political Expression", *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 66, No. 5 (March 1968; pp. 1040-1057), p. 1056.
48. "Yippie Leader Arrested on Flag-Desecration Charge Outside House Hearing", David E. Rosenbaum, *The New York Times*, October 4, 1968, p. 30. Obtained from *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times* (1851-2003).
49. There seems to be some confusion as to where Hoffman obtained his shirt. Some sources stated that the shirt was purchased from Sears, Roebuck and other sources suggested that a flag was actually cut up to make the shirt. When Hoffman appeared on *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1970, the flag shirt that he wore on the show was blacked out before the show aired. In an interview, Griffin stated that he believed that Hoffman's shirt was made to resemble a flag, but that he did not believe the shirt was actually made out of an American flag. ("Callers Protest Shirt Blackout", Jack Gould, *The New York Times*, March 29, 1970, p. 65. Obtained from *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times* (1851-2003).
50. See Goldstein, Chapter 4, for an in depth analysis of flag desecration cases involving clothing.
51. "Of Meaning and Masters: Political Symbolism & Symbolic Action", Rebecca Klatch, *Polity*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 137-154.
52. "Amendment splits Americans: What gestures honor flag, which disrespect it?", Bob Dart, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, June 21, 2005, p. 9, A1. Article retrieved from <http://ajc.com/news/content/news/stories/0605/21natflag.html>.
53. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service Public Affairs Photo Gallery website: http://149.101.23.2/graphics/publicaffairs/photo/2005_03_11Bush_Lib1_Large.jpg.
54. Goldstein, p. 149.
55. "Exhibition Review", Char Miller, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, Is. 3 (2000), ¶ 8. On-line: www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/87.3/exr_5.html.
56. Zelinsky, p. 277.
57. Miller, ¶ 10.