



Emotion and Flags: A Personal Perspective

John M. Purcell

I suppose most people have some flag-related incident in their lives that causes them to feel strong emotion. Vexillologists, of course, are no exception, in spite of the fact that most of the time we look at flags from an analytical point of view to study and record them. Some examples from my own life may illustrate the point.

In 1961 I was a student at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. It was the beginning of turbulent times in the 1960s, though much of that would arrive in the U.S. somewhat later. In Mexico at the time there were some factions that were very unhappy with U.S. policies (I cannot now remember the specifics of their complaints), and as it happened I found myself in one of the large plazas of the cities where a large group of angry and noisy people were demonstrating against the U.S. In the process of their demonstration, they torched an American flag, sending up exultant cheers as it burned. Nobody tried to stop them. I was appalled. This was the flag of my country, and I, as an American, was one of the people they were shouting about. I felt personally affronted. I had always been taught to treat my country's flag with respect, and had always observed the proper protocol with the display of the flag. Although I was proud to be an American, I had not considered myself especially patriotic. At that moment, as the U.S. flag burned before me, I never felt so much an American, nor have I since.

Another personal incident is strongly etched in my memory. I was in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1974 for the eighth annual meeting of NAVA. While on the scheduled bus tour of the city's important sites, we happened suddenly on a building flying the swastika-emblazoned flag of the German National Socialists that was used prominently during World War II. As a young boy

during that war, I had been much aware of the propaganda of the Allies, and the strong hatred among them for that red-white-and-black flag. The sight of that flag over a Baltimore street came as a shock to me, causing me to react as I were that boy again, nearly thirty years earlier. I assume the flag was displayed by a dissident group, not unlikely white supremacists, but I realized that had anyone dared to put that flag there during the war, it would not have lasted five minutes, and the person who put it there would likely have been jailed as a quisling (a term used then for traitors). Yet there it was, in 1974, and nobody seemed to pay much attention.

I taught for a number of years in Cincinnati high schools. I remember attending an assembly for the students one day in which foreign exchange students who had been at the school for the year and were due to leave shortly were called up to the stage to be recognized and applauded. Each of the half-dozen students was given an American flag as a memento of their stay with us; they, in turn, presented their national flags to the school for display in our school. The students appeared alphabetically by country, and the ceremony proceeded rather perfunctorily with an exchange of flags and applause for each. The last student to be recognized was from Turkey, and unlike his predecessors, when it was time for him to present his flag, he surprised us all by kissing it reverently first. I wondered then whether this was a tradition he had been taught, or a genuine feeling of respect for his country's flag. In any case, we all felt that he had somehow made the moment more solemn.

In 1982 when I was NAVA's president, *NAVA News* published a cartoon, one of a series of cartoons with a vexillological theme, which provoked an indignant letter to me. The cartoon showed a flag with a white field on which a skull was outlined in black. Beneath the skull, instead of the usual cross-bones, were shown two crossed pistols, also outlined in black. Beneath on a white ribbon were the words "National Rifle Association". Below the cartoon was the caption, "A banner with a strange device". The writer of the letter addressed me rather than the editor of *NAVA News* and said that by printing the cartoon NAVA was "becoming an advocate of the deprivation of the rights of American citizens guaranteed under the Second Amendment". He attributed ulterior motives to the editor and the person who had sent the cartoon to him; all this after numerous other cartoons of a wide political spectrum had already appeared. It struck me then that we see what we want to see, and not always the whole picture. I responded to the writer with words to the effect that defense of the Second Amendment should not abrogate the rights under the First.

Finally, perhaps the most enduring emotion with flags, for vexillologists at least, is the strong desire to know more about them. As a boy of about eight years old, I was given a map of the world around which a number of national flags were printed. The idea was that one would cut the flags out, mount them on pins, and put them on the national capitals. I soon learned a lot about geography! I also found out that many countries' flags were missing, so I began to search out and draw the others to make my map complete. It took me years—I was 15 or 16 before I finished with the map of that era. The most frustrating missing flag was Bhutan's: it was not to be found anywhere in flag books of the time. Finally, somewhat naively, I wrote to the king of that country to inquire what the flag might be. I never received an answer, but I was obsessed with that mystery flag. Years later, when Bhutan joined the United Nations, I finally got to see the flag, which was nothing like I would have imagined it. Interestingly enough, Dr. Whitney Smith of the Flag Research Center once told me when I related this story to him that he had, as a young future vexillologist, pursued this very same flag for years, even, as I had, writing to Bhutan for the information.

What motivates us as vexillologists? Why do we seek out the unknown, the long-forgotten, the rare or priceless, the new, and the significant flags for research, study, and collection? Perhaps it is a kind of passion to show the world that flags are more than colored pieces of cloth with differing designs; flags carry with them the ethos of the people who make and adopt them, for better or for worse. They may be reviled, burned, saluted, or revered, but they have earned an enduring place in the history of the human race.

This essay first appeared on NAVA's website in 2000.